

**Institute of Distance and Open Learning
Gauhati University**

**MA in English
Semester 2**

**Paper VII
Romantic and Victorian Theory and Criticism**

**Block 1
Romantic Critics**



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Block Introduction:

You are more likely to associate the Romantic and the Victorian periods in English literary history with poetry, in the case of the first, and with novels and poetry in the case of the second. This is understandable since more often we read the creative productions of the writers dealt with in this block than their critical works. In brief, to connect 'Romantic' and 'Victorian' with 'criticism' is based on the reading we bring to these writers through the circumstances of our position and also through the related facts of the prevalence of accepted notions of literary history.

In a way it makes for some comforting common-sense to read the Romantic period's critical thought as the logical outcome of --or even the logical reaction to--what had gone before it in the preceding eighteenth century. The ideas that appear in the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge are based on the opposition to the values so dear to the Enlightenment: rationality, empirical knowledge, the mind as *tabula rasa*, and so on. To the credit of these two famous Romantic figures and what they proposed, their original thought gives flesh to that opposition with a systematic understanding close to the method of a philosophy. You should find Wordsworth's 'Preface' interesting not because he simply worded the argument for democratising poetry, but because he seemed to have anticipated the focus on the problem of language, its origins, its functions in society, etc. As Wimsatt and Brooks have remarked, the question of 'poetic diction' is like shorthand for a range of problems important in literary study.

Poetic language, or the language of verse, involves questions of representation (*mimesis*), of subjectivity, of social relations, and other issues too numerous to be touched upon with compactness. You would know that Coleridge was also involved in the project of the *Lyrical Ballads* and thus whatever Wordsworth discusses in his 'Preface' connects to the sentiments held by Coleridge.

Our method, in the units below, has been to bring to you some of the concepts that the critics have turned their attention to. A running theme in the work of the two critics whom we have given more space, Wordsworth and Coleridge, is the issue of the status of poetry. This is not only because all three were poets in their own right but because also on account of the stage of literary history that had been reached; the different cultural spaces occupied by

poetry and prose, in the form of novels, posed questions of importance and relevance for the poet. Our awareness of these circumstantial aspects of the history of criticism makes our readings more comprehensive.

Again, as in all our units, do try out all the self-assessment questions. Read the supplementary information that we bring to you. Your reading of these critics will be richer and more sound.

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Unit 1

Romantic Theory and Criticism

Contents:

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1.1 OBJECTIVES

We are hopeful that by the end of working through this unit, you will have gained a comprehensive idea of the basic ideas of Romanticism. You should be able to

- *name* the writers and thinkers associated with Romanticism
- *describe* the main features of the movement
- *explain* the basic ideas of Romantic thought, and
- *sketch* the reach of Romantic thought

1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Two famous documents lead us to the romantic movement in Germany and England: *Das Athenaeum* (1798 - 1800), sponsored mainly by the Schlegels, in Germany; *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), in England. Wordsworth's famous 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* was added in 1800. In one sense, romanticism signified a departure from "the Latin tradition and the adoption of a view of poetry centered on the expression and communication of emotion." This can be traced back to a wider current spreading through much of Western Europe. But romantic criticism also achieves the task of the "establishment of a dialectical and symbolist view of poetry".

The beginnings of Romanticism can be found in the late eighteenth century while it reached its zenith in the early nineteenth century. Romanticism emerged during the time span in which various movements and events took place-the French Revolution, especially, and the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the growth of intense nationalism, the oppositional movements of socialism, and even anarchism. Rather than the imitation of classical writers and models, a shift in philosophical orientation occurred through the ideas expounded by thinkers like Locke, Hume, and Burke. In the later eighteenth century alone neoclassical ideals had been displaced by a new emphasis on individual experience. In some ways, Romanticism shares similarities with Enlightenment thought as in the profoundly utopian faith in progress and also the emphasis on experience as authoritative. This supported an intense individualism but it also embraced a belief in democratic values. From critics like Edward Young, William Duff, and Joseph Warton came a stress on originality, creative imagination and genius.

A historical view of the Romantic Movement in Germany:

"The Romantic Movement began less as a protest against the Neoclassicism of Weimar than as a radical extension of some of its beliefs and interests, especially, at first, in its emphasis upon Greek antiquity, longed for like some lost paradise. The Romantic poet could create his own world from reality or from fancy and could turn whatever he liked into poetry. There was to be no end to the innovations made in content and style by the great wealth of literary talents who now emerged all over Germany and from various strata of society. The rising generation felt free and able to revise all accepted representative values, not only in art and literature but in other spheres as well. Among the topics then in vogue were nature and the spirit in all their manifestations, particularly the supernatural, the subconscious, and the mystical. In the evolution of German Romanticism no small part was played by the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Two major writers fall between Neoclassicism and Romanticism proper: Friedrich Hölderlin and Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter). Hölderlin was one of Germany's greatest poets. He was a friend of the philosophers Friedrich Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel and was influenced by Klopstock and Schiller. His lyrical novel *Hyperion* (1797 -99) sums up his major concerns: his yearning for antiquity, for union with the divine, and for a political renewal of Germany. . .Jean Paul's once immensely popular novels introduced a new focus on ordinary life. They lack

shape but sustain interest by their display of humour, warmth, sentiment, and whimsy. His main novels include *Hesperus* (1795), *Siebenkäs* (1796-97; *Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces*), *Titan* (1800-03), and *Die Flegeljahre* (1804-05; *Walt and Vult*).

The first Romantic school originated in Jena about 1798. It was partly inspired by the subjective idealism of Fichte, but its principal philosopher was Schelling, whose *Naturphilosophie* asserted the unity of nature and the human spirit. The major literary theorists were the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich von Schlegel, who held that the first duty of criticism was to understand and appreciate, while Romantic literature was to encompass all forms of writing in "progressive universal poetry". Their main literary model was Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. The chief creative writers of the Jena school were Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, and Novalis (Freidrich von Hardenberg). Wackenroder's collection of anecdotal accounts and sketches, *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (1797) was the school's first major literary production, and it gave to art a religious significance. . The finest imaginative achievement of early Romanticism, however, was found in Novalis' lyrics and aphorisms and in his unfinished novels . . "

"The first Romantic school had dispersed by 1804. After 1805, however, a second school developed in Heidelberg around Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, and Johann Joseph von Görres. Unlike the members of the earlier school, the Heidelberg writers produced historical works and also collected folk songs and popular prose romances."

(From the *Encyclopedia Britannica, fifteenth edition, 2005*)

We can see here some of the reasons for the (initial) Romantic support for the French Revolution as in the examples of Blake, Wordsworth, and (Johann Christian Friedrich) Hölderlin, a major German poet. Major poets and writers like George Sand, Shelley, Byron, Heine, and Victor Hugo, upheld calls for justice and liberation for traditional forms of oppression. Figures like Blake, Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth, however, also reacted vehemently against those features of the social and economic conditions which favoured the bourgeoisie such as the industrialised, mechanical order of life with the accompanying misery and squalor. The new, lowered standards of morality based on the ideals of utility and maximum profit, the ideals of weighing such profits ("calculation") were objects of artistic and poetic condemnation. Romantic thought also makes its earliest appearance in writers like Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith and Robert Burns. Wordsworth and Coleridge stand

out as perhaps the most influential exponents of Romantic thought. Many critics have noted that the Romantics sought a vision at the cultural and aesthetic levels to counter the social and cultural effects of bourgeois practices which had broken the world into fragments divorcing individual from society, reason and emotion, past and present. Thus William Blake turned to a mystical vision which attempted to reconcile contradictions. Poetry could effect the reconciliation of opposites, Blake thought. He took a mythical view of history. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) he presented his views on religion.

SAQ:

How are such Romantic ideas (of the reconciliation of opposites) adumbrated in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*? (90 words)

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1.3 IMPORTANT FIGURES

Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, expounded fundamentally Romantic principles showing the superiority of the imagination over reason, and the higher status of poetry. Along with other Romantic thinkers - Dorothy Wordsworth (1771 - 1855; who influenced the poet and her brother, William Wordsworth, considerably), Coleridge, Mary Shelley (1797 - 1851; author of *Frankenstein*), and Byron - Shelley and Keats expounded important Romantic ideals of "negative capability", the high status of poetry, the rejection of conventional beliefs, and so on.

If we look to Germany in the late eighteenth century, we see the names of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Goethe, and Schiller who experimented with the movement known as the *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Stress"). It was Herder (who came under the tutelage of Johann Georg Hamann, "who emphasized the inspirational and symbolical function of language") and who "grasped, as no thinker before him had done, the idea

of historical evolution and engendered the main current of the Sturm und Drang. He stressed the value of historical continuity in literature and pointed to the folk songs, ballads, and romances of the Middle Ages as sources of inspiration to which Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) had recently drawn attention. It was, moreover, Herder who aroused in Goethe an interest in Gothic architecture, the *Volkslied*, and Shakespeare."

German Romanticism revolved around figures like Schiller, Heinrich Heine (1797 - 1856), Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Novalis (1772 - 1801). The foundations of Romanticism were laid down in Germany, especially in the work of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schlegel. Kant advocated aesthetic autonomy - an idea that helped to reinforce the Romantic stress on the creative imagination and its originality. The poet, Friedrich von Schiller (1759 - 1805), was profoundly influenced by the concept and saw the aesthetic space as allowing freedom, and reconciling sensation and reason. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 - 1814) put stress on the ego or self as the primary reality which mediates between appearance and reality. Friedrich Schelling (1775 - 1854) is to be remembered as the chief exponent of Romantic philosophy who proposed in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) that consciousness is centered on itself and that knowledge of the world mediates self-consciousness.

Friedrich von Schlegel was another contributor to German Romantic thought. With his openness to the ideas of Schiller and Fichte, Schlegel relied upon the concept of Romantic irony as giving to poetry its special status. For him, Romantic irony recast Socratic irony: "In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly consciously philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication." Schlegel conceives of irony as a form of paradox in the sense that it accommodates divergent perspectives on the world without proposing a higher reconciliation but with the acknowledgement that contradiction and paradox are of this world.

SAQ:

1. With whom do you identify the following?

Confessions of an English Opium Eater.....

Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude.....

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.....

"*Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*".....

.....

"*A Slumber did my Spirit Seal*".....

The Lay of the Last Minstrel.....

The Mysteries of Udolpho.....

2. Pick the odd one out:

Visions of the Daughters of Albion, The Book of Urizen, The Book of Thel, A Vindication of the Rights of Women

William Hazlitt (1778 - 1830) wrote in his essay "First Acquaintance with the Poets" of his deep appreciation of Coleridge (and of Wordsworth) which is identical with what he expresses in *Lectures on the English Poets*, that Coleridge was "*the only person from whom I ever learnt anything*". But, as Prof. Wellek points out, Hazlitt is quite different in his critical methods from Coleridge. He is a practical critic whereas Coleridge dealt with general principles. Elsewhere, as Wellek observes, Hazlitt rejected Coleridge's position as a critic as well as his philosophical principles. In his book *On the Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), Hazlitt even maintains silence with regard to Coleridge's Shakespeare lectures. This is just to bring to you both the closeness and the distance between these critics and thinkers. Hazlitt was also influenced by Wordsworth's prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads*. There are other affinities between Hazlitt and Charles Lamb (1775 - 1834). Prof. Wellek mentions this relationship between Lamb and Hazlitt in these words: "What is common to Lamb and Hazlitt are three methods of criticism which were apparently new at that time: evocation, metaphor, and personal reference. The methods are ultimately Longinian, but there are no examples in English 18th century criticism which even approximate what

Lamb and Hazlitt were doing." Lamb himself put paid to any estimate of himself as a theorist, saying, "I can vehemently applaud, or perversely stickle, at *parts*: but I cannot grasp at a whole." However, many of the assessments he made of other poets show a fine critical mind at work. Of Hazlitt as a critic, Wellek remarks that, "Hazlitt wrote much on his contemporaries. He meets the difficult test of recognizing the best of his time remarkably well - a test so difficult that it is in fact rarely met even by the greatest critics. Though Hazlitt's political outlook embittered his relations with Wordsworth and Coleridge, he always recognized their greatness as poets."

To include John Keats (1795 - 1821) among the critics of the Romantic period may seem that we are stretching the category, but Keats did write "one review, published criticism of two performances by Kean, left some marginalia in copies of Milton, Shakespeare, and Burton, and pronounced on poetry and poets in his private letters." Keats derived his critical ideas from Hazlitt and Wordsworth. He greatly admired Hazlitt but Keats expressed his critical ideas in his own unique way. His focus was on the "poet, his character and function, not with poetry as a structure and meaning". (Wellek).

Stop to Consider

"The best known and most striking passages in Keats's letters are those on the impersonality, the "negative capability" of the poet. "Negative capability" means to Keats something quite specific, the capability of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." By this standard the poet (and Keats always has Shakespeare as a model for himself in mind) should not be committed, should not be, like Coleridge, a philosopher "incapable of remaining content with half knowledge." "Negative capability" is this a phrase which defines Keats's grasp of the nature of an aesthetic which is not the same as the intellectual or the didactic. Keats condemns the overtly didactic many times: "we hate," he says speaking of Wordsworth, "poetry that has a palpable design upon us," "we do not want to be bullied into a certain philosophy." Shelley seems to Keats too much of a propagandist in verse: in the only letter he wrote him he advised him to "curb his magnanimity" and be more of an artist and "to load every rift of his subject with ore." But this recognition of the special workings of poetry does not mean the later 19th-century aestheticism, the view that the poet is maker of merely beautiful and useless decorative things. It means that Keats "never wrote a single line of poetry with the least shadow of public thought," that poetry should come (as Keats felt that it did to him in his best moments) as "naturally as the leaves of a tree." The "genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: it cannot be matured

by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself." Thus poetry is to Keats mainly self-expression and an expression of feeling rather than of ideas or moral precepts."

[From René Wellek : *A History of Modern Criticism 1750 -1950: The Romantic Age* , p.213]

"In Romantic as in Neoplatonic thought, division, separateness, externality, isolation are equated with evil, as well as with that other consequence of the Biblical fall of man, death. "So long as I myself am *identical* with nature," said Schelling, "I understand what a living nature is as well as I understand my own life. . . .As soon, however, as I separate myself . . from nature, nothing more is left for me but a dead object." "The activity of differentiating" by the understanding, Hegel wrote, effects the "dismembered "unactuality" that we call "death"; while "the life that endures and preserves itself through death is the life of the spirit." As Novalis summarized what was a Romantic commonplace: "All evil and wickedness is isolating (it is the principle of separation)."

"In consonance with this outlook, Romantic thinkers regard philosophical reflection, the very act of taking thought (since it necessarily seeks understanding by the analytic division of one into many) as in itself, in Schelling's words, "a spiritual sickness of mankind . . .an evil," because once begun, it continues inexorably to divide everything "which nature had permanently united." And the radical and cardinal malaise of man, because it is both the initial cause and the continuing manifestation of his evil and suffering, is the separation with which consciousness and reflection begins when "man sets himself in opposition to the outer world" - in the split, as it was variously expressed, between ego and non-ego, subject and object, spirit and other, nature and mind. The primal fracture which results when man begins to reflect, and so to philosophize, is usually conceived as having two dimensions, one cognitive and the other moral. . . ." Romantic philosophy is thus primarily a metaphysics of integration, of which the key principle is that of the "reconciliation," or synthesis, of whatever is divided, opposed, and conflicting."

[From *Natural Supernaturalism*, by M.H.Abrams, pp.181 -2]

We cannot leave out the spread of Romanticism to America. From the wider political angle, the French Revolution of 1789, and the tumultuous upheavals in Europe in 1830 and 1848 also had their impact on the situation in America. Economically, industrial capitalism was common to both Europe and America which alone can be said to have engendered a certain way of perceiving the world. In brief, having achieved independence from Great Britain in 1776, American thinkers turned to questions of national identity and a distinctly American literary tradition. This happened under the influence of Romantic notions of nature and self. Romantic thinkers in America included the names of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville.

Emerson is central to American Romanticism as he brought together ideas from Wordsworth, and Coleridge, in relation to nature, imagination and language. America is posited as a "poem" needing inscription, in the works of Emerson and Whitman. Henry David Thoreau (1817 - 1862) is to be remembered in this connection, too, especially with reference to his *Walden* (1854) which embodies his high Romanticism. Both Emerson and Thoreau also were influenced by Carlyle. Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience" lent inspiration to both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.(leader of the American civil rights movement).

SAQ:

Try to comment on the potential for 'revolutionary' thought in Romantic. What does it say of the Romantic conception of the relation of individual/self with the world ? (80 + 80 words)

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1.4 KEY CONCEPTS

Romanticism arose largely in the fields of literature and philosophy. A major element of Romantic thought is its turn towards subjectivity which is to be contrasted with the classical insistence on the objective. Following the ideas of Fichte, and Schelling, as much as of Hegel, Romanticism addressed the relations between self and nature, and the subject and the object because it saw these different worlds as 'mutually constructive processes'. It understood human perception as being active rather than being passively receptive to impressions from the outside world. Thus it became possible to valorise uniqueness, originality, experience, in place of convention and tradition. The self of Romantic thought is not identical with the self of the bourgeois individualism of political and economic philosophies. Romantic thinkers conceived of the self as much more authentic and profound, concealed within the coverings of convention. Through principles of unity, as in irony, for instance, Romantic thinkers propounded the self as embodying a unity

only thus made possible and bringing together the fragments splintered via the visions of the bourgeois world. Such a process was the achievement of the poetic vision. Thus the Romantics tended to exalt the poet as the poet's originality made him capable of making the essential connections between discrete phenomena and sublimate the human faculty of perception in terms of a unifying, a comprehensive vision.

The imagination is, for the Romantics, a crucial human faculty with the capacity to unify and harmonize such polarities as sensation and reason. We should not suppose, simplistically, that the Romantics displaced Enlightenment 'reason' with imagination, (associated with emotion, instinct, and spontaneity). What Romantic thought sought to do was to situate 'imagination' within a larger, more comprehensive scheme of perception. To understand this better, we have to return to Immanuel Kant who really attempted to show the limits of the superiority of 'reason'. Much of Romantic thought takes Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena, as its starting point. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), like all the other German Romantics, argued against scientism: science had made "the infinite creative music of the universe into the dull clattering of a gigantic mill driven by the stream of chance and floating upon it, a mill, without architect and without miller, grinding itself to pieces, in fact a *perpetuum mobile*". If we look at the philosophical currents of the 17th and 18th centuries, we can recall the empirical and analytic trends which the German romantics sought to counter with "a program for poetic re-establishment of the analytically dissolved harmony between man and nature and between the parts of man's own consciousness" (Wimsatt & Brooks). Both Kant and Friedrich von Schlegel laid down the idea that aesthetic judgments arise independently of moral standards or of judgments based on knowledge or information. For Kant, the mind has an active role in constructing the world; what we know of the world is through its phenomena. What the world might be in reality, in itself, is unknowable and is the world of noumena. Friedrich von Schiller, the poet, was perhaps one to be most influenced by Kant's idea of the aesthetic as a mode of freedom which united sensation and reason. As we have already noted, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 - 1814), attempted to overcome what appeared to be the irreconcilability between the worlds of the phenomena and the noumena through his positing of the self or the self as the primary reality. However, Friedrich W. J. Schelling

(1775 - 1854), who can be counted as the most influential for Romantic thought drew up the principles of a new philosophy without adopting the Kantian distinctions between aesthetics, epistemology and ethics. He, like Fichte, merged both subject and object by making exalting human creativity ("poetry"): "I am convinced that the highest act of reason is the aesthetic act embracing all ideas and that truth and goodness are made kindred only in beauty. The philosopher must have as much aesthetic power as the poet. Poetry thus assumes a new dignity; it becomes what it was in the beginning - the teacher of mankind: for there is no philosophy or history any more; poetry alone will outlive all other sciences and arts." Wellek explains Schelling's position on the role of imagination in this light - "Both the philosopher and the artist penetrate into the essence of the universe, the absolute. Art thus breaks down the barriers between the real and the ideal world. It is the representation of the infinite in the finite, a union of nature and freedom, for it is both a product of the conscious and the unconscious, of the imagination which unconsciously creates our real world and consciously creates the ideal world of art." We can see Schelling's influence on Coleridge and the other English Romantics.

Check Your Progress

1. Explain the prominence given to poetry in Romantic thought.
2. Explain the importance ascribed to the role played by imagination in human perception as propounded by Romantic thinkers.

Wellek tells us that the term, 'romantic', did not carry the same associations in England as it did in Germany. There was no corresponding movement in England where it referred to medieval romance and the epics, particularly in the 17th century. By the eighteenth century, English writers, no doubt, were aware of a movement in Germany which rejected the standards of the neo-classical Enlightenment. In 1811, Coleridge distinguished between the classical and the romantic-by referring back to the ideas of August Wilhelm Schlegel. This debate drew the energies of the German critics who had begun to use the term, 'romantic', in referring to what they considered a "central and dynamic literary conception". A.W.Schlegel conducts a systematic discussion on the topic in his Vienna *Lectures on Dramatic Art*

and Poetry (1809 - 1811) while talking of the whole history of drama. While trying to work out a proper theory of criticism, Schlegel recognised "the cooperation and interpenetration of criticism and history, theory and practice." Wellek further adds here that "[A.W. Schlegel] argues that there cannot be history without theory, since history, if it is not to be a mere chronicle, requires a principle of selectivity. Each phenomenon of art can be assigned its true position only by relating it to the idea of art. On the other hand, no theory of art can exist without the history of art, for obviously history, especially art history, has to teach by examples. Schlegel recognizes the central difficulty of art history, . . . Each genuine work of art is perfect by itself; but if history means progress, approximation to perfection, then art history must be made up of imperfect phenomena which actually should not have a place in the realm of genuine art." If you follow Schlegel's argument you can see how systematically he is able to articulate the search for the foundations of an impartial critical method which has to recognise the presence of a subjective element as well as its capacity to be both theoretical and historical. He thought thus that "Critical reflection is thus a constant experimentation to discover theoretical statements." The full-fledged form of his argument is expressed in his contrast between the classic and the romantic. In his third lecture course of 1803 - 04, Schlegel made a systematic survey of romantic literature. Only in his Vienna lectures does he discuss the terms fully. Schlegel devoted his attention to German 18th-century literature even while he was well grounded in the study of Shakespeare's plays besides other modern literature. For English Romantics A.W.Schlegel and his brother Friedrich Schlegel, "best formulated a view of literature and criticism which was transmitted by Coleridge to the English-speaking world and is, on many essential points, accepted by recent English and American criticism."

Stop to Consider

Irony in Romanticism

We can note three features of Romanticism: its original association with tales of adventure especially of the medieval period, with the fantastic, with folklore, the legendary, and finally, with nature. Romanticism also calls up a focus on the subjective, the expression of the subjective, the sublimation of nature, primitivism,

spontaneity chiefly related with childhood, the poetic and the sublime, and the insistence on the imagination as a greater power than reason. An important disposition of Romanticism lies in the break with ideas that ultimately derived from the Roman poet of ancient times, Horace, who proposed that literature should both please and instruct. If we look closely into this last proposition we can find a place in it to also add that this imposes utilitarian and moralistic constraints on literature. Romanticism can be seen as the attempt to break away from this mould and to emphasise the autonomy of art. With this idea comes the related point that art and literature can therefore be accommodative of conflicting perspectives on life and the world. Thus we should remember that the philosophical basis of Romanticism lies in the status it gives to irony.

How does irony accommodate contrary points of view?

One strand of Romantic thought leads to Friedrich von Schlegel who propounded the concept of Romantic irony. Schlegel began as a classical philologist. Through his being influenced by the ideas of Schiller and Fichte, he saw irony as the special orientation of poetry. Schlegel attempted to work out a definition of poetry as also to define 'romantic'. He saw irony as "a form of paradox. Paradox is what is at the same time good and great." He viewed irony as the recognition of the paradoxical nature of the world. This meant that an ambivalent attitude is the means of grasping the contradictoriness of the totality of the world. Irony stands for the struggle between the relative and the absolute, "the simultaneous consciousness of the impossibility and the necessity of a complete account of reality." (Wellek). A distance between the object and the artist allows art to be created in a "liberal frame of mind". An artist can be objective only when he is detached from his work. Like Kant who saw art as free activity, Schlegel viewed art as founded in irony - "we demand that the events, the people, in brief the whole play of life, should really be conceived and represented as play" - because irony is to be associated with "transcendental poetry", the "poetry of poetry" as in the work of Pindar, Dante, and Goethe. "Irony to Schlegel is objectivity, complete superiority, detachment, manipulation of the subject matter." (Wellek). Schlegel introduced the term, "irony" into discussions of literature. He gives it a meaning different from the ancient association with rhetoric. He did not use the term, "romantic irony". But his interpretation of 'irony' is also different from 'tragic irony' (as in the work of Sophocles) which was developed by Connop Thirlwall in the 19th century.

In his "Critical Fragments", he recast Socratic irony and wrote: "In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute

and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication." Schlegel saw incomprehensibility as a feature of understanding; in 1800, in his essay "On Incomprehensibility," he spoke of the "irony of irony" and that "all incomprehension is relative". You must understand that this is very different from the Enlightenment stand that incomprehension is an 'evil'. Through such an argument Schlegel was able to point out the limits of rationality and that our knowledge - systems are based on principles of which we have no full understanding.

[Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*; M.A.R.Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism*]

Check Your Progress

1. Give a brief sketch of the main exponents of Romantic critical theory along with an outline of their main critical concerns.
2. Write short notes on the following:
 - a) The Romantic Imagination
 - b) Human nature in Romantic theory
 - c) Keats as Romantic critic
3. Write an essay on the influence of the German romantic thinkers on English critics highlighting the specific areas of concern.

We have already noted the Romantics' high elevation of the poet. Some of this high regard may be traced back even to Aristotle who linked poetry with natural endowment. We should also note that this is to be seen in contradistinction from the classical view of art as the employment of conscious craft. Through the Renaissance, inspiration was commonly linked to nature. By the time we come to the eighteenth century, we see Addison attaching 'genius' to inborn poetic power. Pope declared Shakespeare to be "original". The notion of 'natural' genius brought in related questions of poetic inspiration. How to explain the source of poetic invention, and thus the status of artistic creativity? With periodic variations, this ideational concept continued to draw critical attention since artistic standards needed universal foundations, not the ordinary values of 'taste'. By the end of the eighteenth century in England, poets began to acknowledge inventiveness as the product of whim,

the unpremeditated impulse, or nature, and therefore 'organic' in this sense. In his 'Defence of Poetry', Shelley asserted that poetic composition cannot be consciously willed - he called it an "error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study". But Shelley also sets up his concept within another frame: inspiration is seen as a "power [that] arises from within" the mind; the creative process (as involved in the work of art), or invention, is a natural process, like embryonic growth. Hazlitt, in his essay, "Is Genius Conscious of Its Powers?", claimed that "The definition of genius is that it acts unconsciously; and those who have produced immortal works have done so without knowing how or why". We can now see that ideas of originality in art, poetic inspiration, nature, genius, poetry, all began to be intricately linked. You must also appreciate that the concept of the unconscious is also bound up with these ideas since what is 'natural' and not subject to the force of conscious will, can be identified with the 'unconscious'.

Coleridge was much influenced by the German critics, especially A.W. Schlegel, in his distinctions between mechanical and organic art. To Coleridge, organicism was a useful concept applicable in the field of literary criticism. You can understand how this idea is made to work if you consider the instance of Friedrich Schlegel who wrote in 1795-6, that all Greek art can be viewed as "a single growth whose 'seed is grounded in human nature itself,' and which possesses a 'collective force' as its dynamic and guiding principle". Schlegel continued,-- "And in its historical course, each 'advance unfolds out of the preceding one as if of its own accord, and contains the complete germ of the following stage' ." Similar to what the German theorists held, Coleridge presumed that the process of literary invention involved those same forces by which things grow, -- the natural, the unplanned and the unconscious.

M.H.Abrams, from whom we have given you this lucid explanation of the meaning of organicism, also provides this description of how the model of organic growth came to underlie important issues in aesthetics: "The essential categories of organicism fostered characteristic and important criteria of aesthetic value. These are opposed to the main inclination of taste, in French and early English classicism, for the simple, the clear, the concordant, and the complete. Organic criteria bear a resemblance to the aesthetic qualities which were collected, in the course of the eighteenth century, under the rubric of 'the sublime,' but are formulated in distinctive terms, and with a

novel rationale. For example, organic growth is an open-ended process, nurturing a sense of the promise of the incomplete, and the glory of the imperfect. Also, as a plant assimilates the most diverse materials of earth and air, so the synthetic power of imagination 'reveals itself,' in Coleridge's famous phrase, 'in the balance or reconciliation of *opposite* or *discordant* qualities.' And only in a 'mechanical' unity are the parts sharply defined and fixed; in organic unity, what we find is a complex inter-relation of living, indeterminate, and endlessly changing components." (p.220, *The Mirror and the Lamp*)

1.5 SUMMING UP

By now you should be familiar with much of the basic complex of ideas inherent in Romantic thought. You would have also gathered thus far that Romantic poetry grew out of a whole philosophy of life, nature, social relations and human nature. The most explicit statements of this philosophy are to be found in Wordsworth and Coleridge. The theoretical premises may be faulted on grounds of consistency, according to the critics of Romanticism, but considering the impact of such philosophical premises on literary writing of the time, we have to regard these poets as major exponents of a particular world-view. Thus their formulations centre on ideas of the imagination, human nature, the natural world, relations between this human matrix and the non-human features of worldly existence, the self and the other, the nature of perception and cognition, as well as such topics as human subjectivity and its connections with language. You will also read more specific discussions of these as you read of Wordsworth and Coleridge below.

1.6 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Duncan Wu (ed.): *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1996
2. M.A.R.Habib: *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*, Blackwell Publishing, Indian Reprint 2006
3. René Wellek: *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750 - 1950, Vol.2: The Romantic Age*; Jonathan Cape, London, 1955
4. M. H. Abrams: *Super Naturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, W.W.Norton & Company Ltd., 1971, First South Asian Edition 2002
5. M.H.Abrams: *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 1953, Indian Edition 2006

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Unit 2

Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introducing the Critic
- 2.3 Reading the Text
- 2.4 Key Concepts
 - 2.4.1 The Creative Imagination
- 2.5 Ideas in Practice
- 2.6 Summing Up
- 2.7 References/Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims at giving you a fair idea of Wordsworth's work as a critic. While your study will focus only on Wordsworth's famous 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*, you will be taken through some of the accompanying background and history. Thus, by the end of the unit, you should be able to

- *name* some of Wordsworth's contributions to critical debates
- *explain* the significance of Wordsworth's work
- *describe* Wordsworth's status as a critic

2.2 INTRODUCING THE CRITIC

Wordsworth's criticism as put forth in his prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads*, marks an exposition of Romantic principles which are basic to the movement as a whole. His literary criticism is contained in "the Prefaces of 1800 and 1815, the Appendix of 1802, the Supplementary Essay of 1815, the three essays upon epitaphs and the correspondence" and these writings contain ideas like: "the disapproval of poetic diction, the idea of imitating rustic speech, the concept of poetry as the overflow of feelings". Wordsworth was critical of the Augustan tradition even though in actual fact he had

personally known both Pope and Dryden. Wordsworth admired Milton and Spenser and as Prof. Wellek remarks, there is a curious paradox here - "in a curious way, . . . at first sight Wordsworth sounds like a naturalist defending the imitation of folk ballads and rustic speech . . . But actually Wordsworth assimilates Spenser, Milton, Chaucer, and Shakespeare to his concept of "nature" without making them over into primitives". You must understand this within a proper frame; Wordsworth asked for a poetry that would reflect the simple language of simple men, but as other critics like Coleridge pointed out, this is not as simple as it sounds. Rustic speech may not evoke poetic language so what Wordsworth meant must be seen only in the literary context. Certainly, Wordsworth was the inheritor of traditional values and thus his admiration of the earlier great poets would help to create his notion of what was 'simple' and 'natural'.

Wordsworth's rejection of the poetic diction derived from the 18th century and his turning towards spoken language gave rise to an animated debate. This established poetic diction had already become outworn and Wordsworth found diverse reasons for his stand. Much can be, and has been, made of Wordsworth's adoption of the "natural language" of men. As Wellek points out, "At times, Wordsworth's "rustic speech" becomes difficult to distinguish from generally human speech, emotional language, purified for the purposes of the poet." However, he also thought that poetic language reflects a "state of vivid sensation" and that the poetic language currently employed "falls short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions".

From the discussion he carried on, we can see a kind of primitivism at work in Wordsworth's propositions. But again, we must distinguish this from a thorough-going brand of primitivism which looked back to a past golden age. Wordsworth never completely held such a belief although, at the same time, he connected poetry to childhood and a more primitive form of society, particularly an agrarian society.

He displayed a concern for folk poetry—despite his classical training --- and had a high regard for Robert Burns, even writing in ballad stanzas and in folk forms. Although he saw poetry as arising out of powerful feelings, he also saw it as stemming from "emotion recollected in tranquility". The process itself is such that there is a paralleling of the original emotion recollected. Thus he recognised the presence of consciousness in the creative process.

2.3 READING THE TEXT

Among the preliminary remarks made by Wordsworth, you should note that he attempts to justify his reasons for having departed from current fashions - "Poems so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed." He proceeds to give a word of explanation for his choice of subject, the purpose behind the poetic venture, and what had been hoped for in the poetic exercise.

SAQ:

By what name do we know the style typical of poetry written at the end of the 18th century? Which major poetic works were published then?
(40 + 30 words)

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The phrases that stand out (5th paragraph) are, "incidents and situations from common life", "a selection of language really used by men", "a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect", "tracing . . the primary laws of our nature" and "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement". The word "association" should remind you of David Hume and his concept of the association of ideas. In 1749, David Hartley (independently of Hume) brought out his version of associative theory in which he showed clearly that simple sensation gave rise to all the complex processes and contents of the mind. Soon this concept of association was incorporated into conceptions of the literary imagination.

Stop to Consider

Hartleyan Associationism

From *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, W.K. Wimsatt & Cleanth Brooks

"Association" ... was for the age of reason something which acted as a kind of intermediate justification of emotions . . . The first main sense attached to the term "association of ideas" when it was launched by John Locke in the fourth

edition of his Essay, 1700, was very much like that which the word now has for the ordinary user. It meant a connection between ideas which has occurred a number of times or some one memorable time, yet is not thought of, or should not be thought of, as always or necessarily occurring."

We should observe that Thomas Hobbes had talked about "train of ideas", David Hume had announced his doctrine of association in his Treatise of 1739, and David Hartley put forth his doctrine in his Observations on Man in 1749. "The several Aristotelian principles of association— that is, likeness and difference, cause and effect, contiguity in space and time— with which Hume began his discussion— were at a stroke reduced by Hartley to a single mechanical principle of contiguity in time . . .Hartley made that contiguity a character not of things as known by the human subject but of sensory vibrations and of their "miniature" reproductions . . . in the "medullary" substance of the brain. For each unit or simple item of experience, a vibration of a certain sort and a vestigial reminder of it. If several of these experiences happened to occur together often enough, the recurrence of a single one of the group stimulated from outside would set up a reminiscential jangle of the others."

"During the 18th century . . ."association" was in the air. It was a smart term in the vocabulary of moral and aesthetics theorists and litterateurs. It was system of gently persuasive laws of connection between out ideas . . . by which Hume hoped to advance moral philosophy to the stage where some century earlier physical science had moved ahead of it."

"One . . . application of associationism proceeded upon what in ancient times might have been called the principle of "synecdoche", or part for whole. . . The associational way of explaining the force of skillfully chosen particulars in description was to say that certain particulars were extremely potent in evoking a cloud of further particulars in the imagination of a reader. . . As Addison had put it in *Spectator* No.417:

". . . any single Circumstance of what we have formerly seen often raises up a whole Scene of Imagery, and awakens numberless Ideas that before slept in the Imagination; such a particular Smell or Colour is able to fill the Mind, on a sudden, with the Picture of the Fields or Gardens, where we first met with it, and to bring up into View all the Variety of Images that once attended it. Our Imagination takes the Hint, and leads us unexpectedly into Cities or Theatres, Plains or Meadows." "

The internal structure of this famous discussion by Wordsworth, considered to be the equivalent of a manifesto of Romanticism, shows his method of proceeding to later amplification of each of the points introduced in the beginning: the question of his selection of subjects, the issue of the social

role of language and the related significance of poetic diction, and the status and personality of the poet. Wordsworth's poetic attempt was directed by a deliberate choice of subject and language: "common life" in a language "really used by men". Again, the treatment called for an imaginative "colouring" so as to show everything in "an unusual aspect" which would make them interesting. We see that "common life" turns to "humble and rustic life" as this is the condition favouring a "plainer and more emphatic language" for the "essential passions of the heart". The poet's search for a better poetic language than currently in vogue gives us several elements: simple life as opposed to an over-refined one; plain, unadorned language instead of an artificial and ornate one; language infused with passion or language capable of conveying emotions. Wordsworth was protesting contemporary standards of poetic language.

The problem of language appropriate to literary writing had been much debated in the preceding century, particularly so in the wake of neoclassical admonitions as to what should be the proper poetic diction. Samuel Johnson wrote that there was "before the time of Dryden no poetical diction." Neoclassicism did not give license to affected speech but set its own strictures regarding the use of the polite idiom. Here, Wordsworth is advocating the adoption of unadorned speech but he is also turning to the rural community for new inspiration. He argues that those "essential passions of the heart" give rise to the "manners of rural life" and that such a rural life makes these "elementary feelings" "more easily comprehended" and makes them "more durable". The reason is, "in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." What is Wordsworth arguing for, and arguing against?

"It is worthwhile remembering that . . . Wordsworth was reacting immediately not so much against Spenser, Milton, and Pope, the poets who had created English poetic diction, as against his own now anonymous contemporaries who wrote the *mélange* of dictions which was then poetic staple." (Wimsatt & Brooks) As Wordsworth seeks to explain and clarify his objections to the language of established poetic diction, he also touches upon the relation of poet to society and the impact thereof on the language to be used in poetic composition. His endeavour had been, in his poems, "to bring my language near to the language of men" and in so doing he marks out the similarity of prose and poetry -- "It may be safely affirmed, that there neither

is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." Such statements later were controverted by Coleridge. However, Wordsworth is firm on describing the social functions of poetry. Earlier in the essay Wordsworth had perceptively expressed his condemnation of the contemporary state of society which made people long for superficial excitements.

SAQ:

Which critics have stressed the social responsibilities and functions of poetry? (70 words)

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The conditions of rural life in which men are in direct contact with the beautiful and lasting forms of natural objects give rise, in Wordsworth's view, to "a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation." The argument thus turns upon the social responsibilities of the 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: ...He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge. He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature. And thus the Poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure, which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature, ..." We find it remarkable to note that Wordsworth's concern with the relationship of poet to reader prompts him to claim that "Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men."

Check Your Progress

1. Explain the significance of rural man in Wordsworth's articulation of poetic theory.
2. Elaborate Wordsworth's conception of the man-nature relationship in his famous 'Preface.'
3. How far would you agree that Wordsworth's arguments regarding poetic language is necessarily an argument for the theoretical foundations of poetic practice? Support your answer with references to Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Again, Wordsworth turned against the "triviality and meanness" of contemporary poetry by naming a "purpose" behind his work thus bringing in his famous dictum that "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." We can perceive here not only how poetry is exalted through its association with the best conditions of social rural life, but also how it flows from the wellspring of deep emotions and thought. The poet himself is seen in the highest terms - a concept we have already noted as basic to Romantic thought. The poet is marked out from the ordinary by extraordinary "organic sensibility" and the faculty of philosophical thinking. In line with this estimation of the Poet, Wordsworth proclaims one of the ideas central to Romanticism, that "Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge". It is also infused with pleasure and enjoyment. The pleasure that Wordsworth associates with poetry is not of the usual kind; it is partly dependent upon metre, as it is also the pleasure of the special perception of "similitude in dissimilitude". It is a complex pleasure made up of many features, some of which is based on the connection between poetry and emotions. So we find 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 in a mood

similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion...is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment."

SAQ:

We can see that Wordsworth is making a strong plea for a new poetic diction. Do you think that he is also setting up a distinction between language in rural ("natural") surroundings and that in an urban ("artificial") setting? Or is he looking at a language purified of all ornamentation? (50 + 50 words)

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Wordsworth's 'Preface' thus involves a comprehensive statement of the various aspects of poetry and poetic diction. What is remarkable is that it articulates so fully some of the basic tenets of Romanticism. You should be interested in reading Coleridge's critical response to this essay and the points he contested. These show up the weaknesses in Wordsworth's argument but they do not take away from the philosophy of composition that he sets out in it.

2.4 KEY CONCEPTS

Wordsworth's concept of the imagination was not as extraordinarily clear as with Coleridge. Wellek explains this: "Wordsworth disconcertingly vacillates among three epistemological conceptions. At times he makes imagination purely subjective, an imposition of the human mind on the real world. At other times he makes it an illumination beyond the control of the conscious mind and even beyond the individual soul. But most frequently he takes an in-between position which favours the idea of a collaboration, 'An ennobling interchange / Of action from within and from without. [*The Prelude*]".

2.4.1 THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

The Aristotle conception of poetry made probability or possibility a basic question of poetic theory. However, it is important to remember that this did not mean a simple conformity to the objects of external reality. For a philosopher like Thomas Hobbes, poetic truth meant a correspondence to nature as we know it. How much of the unfamiliar, supernatural world could be drawn into poetry was an issue of some debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We can perceive the significance of the question itself if we take up a couple of comments; David Hume observed that "To draw chimeras is not, properly speaking, to copy or to imitate. The justness of the representation is lost, and the mind is displeased to find a picture, which bears no resemblance to any original." You can see here that Hume is inserting a moral value into poetry as mimesis. The presence of words like "justness" and "displeased" carry moral values of what *should* be or *should not* be. If art, literature or poetry is to be morally meaningful, it must show nature as it is. Chimeras do not occur in the world of familiar so they cannot be imitated in poetry.

Dr. Johnson said that reading the ancient poets was tedious and oppressive due to their allusions to mythology. Yet, at the same time, he conceded that in *Paradise Lost* such allusions added to the variety. Gradually, however, the question also included the problem of justifying the inclusion of the unfamiliar and the strange in poetry. This justification came through the neo-classical principle that poetry imitates nature in order to achieve its ultimate purpose of moving and pleasing the reader. This manner of justification gave way over time to the idea that if certain effects are to be achieved in poetry, this must be in line with what the reader expects.

The discussion thus continued on the question of the psychology of poetic illusion. The issue at stake now turned on the degree of the marvelous that could be incorporated into poetry without stretching it beyond the limits of credibility. Even this, however, did not mean that eighteenth-century poetry favoured myth or magic. A newer concept that emerged in the criticism of the period saw the poem no longer as 'imitation' but as a second 'nature' in the realm of which the poet appears to be god-like, a creator. The idea was not new since Sir Philip Sidney had already mentioned it (in the sixteenth century) in his remark that the poet moves into "another nature" where he

creates "forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demigods, cyclops, chimeras". Addison developed this argument in his *Spectator* (no.419), on "The Pleasures of Imagination" where he points out that the poet moves away from the world of nature as known to us, and invents a world which is valid in its own terms. As he said, poetry "makes new worlds of its own", the poet invents a world which is analogous to the one we know.

SAQ:

How would you receive the view that the "supernatural machinery" of eighteenth-century poetry is replaced in Romantic poetry with an immanently 'divine' spirit in nature? (Much can be said on both sides of the issue!) (80 words)

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You can understand the drift of this extended debate by considering what Abrams tells us: "Following the suggestion in Addison, succeeding commentators,...specifically took the creative indoors and delegated it to the faculty of imagination. A prime source of the concept of 'the creative imagination' - which elevates the imagination above the reason and all other faculties by its hidden claim that this is the mental process reenacting God-was the endeavour to account for fantastic poetic characters which are most utterly 'original', because they had to be invented without the assistance of prior forms in sense." It is easy to see why the next stage in the discussion equates the poet with God-like powers of creating out of nothing. What we can sense here is that once the poetic world is de-linked from references to the external reality, it becomes a matter of internal coherence and organisation. Thus the poetic world is placed at a distance from the empirical world and fresh distinctions between "rational truth" and "poetic truth". The German poet, Goethe, thus distinguished between 'artistic truth' and 'natural truth'.

For the English Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, the creative imagination lifts poetry to another plane: "It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos . . . It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration."

Coleridge makes the metaphor of creation central to his ideas. What he says at the end of Chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria* ("The primary Imagination . . .") includes the new notion-- that the mind perceives. As Abrams explains: "The result is a triple parallel. At its base is the ceaseless self-proliferation of God into the sensible universe. This creative process is reflected in the primary imagination by which all individual minds develop out into their perception of this universe, and it is echoed again in the secondary, or re-creative imagination which is possessed only by the poet of genius. As early as 1801, Coleridge had written that the perceiving mind is not passive, but "made in God's Image, and that, too, in the sublimest sense, the *Image of the Creator* . . .". Three years later he added that the poetic imagination is also "a dim analogue of creation---not all that we can *believe*, but all that we can *conceive* of creation."

Stop to Consider

Primitivism

Prof. M.H.Abrams explains some of Wordsworth's basic assumptions in his criticism:

Human nature was assumed to possess uniform characteristics, "its passions and sensibilities no less than its reason, .. everywhere fundamentally the same". The question, we should ask here is, is it the same across cultures and across time? With respect to the idea that 'primitive' human nature is untainted by artificially-motivated longings and passions, is entailed the problem of seeing human 'nature' as either moving away from a state of nature as society grows more complex (chronological primitivism) or 'human nature' as more pure' in culturally 'primitive' societies which are not over-refined. Prof. Abrams names two kinds of thinking on the issue: theorists of "cultural primitivism" believed that "the elemental and uniform-and, therefore, the normal-aspects of human nature and products are to be found not only in 'chronological', but in 'cultural' primitives, including people dwelling in civilized nations but insulated by caste or rural habitat from the artifice and complications of culture." As we are told, this was the reason for the esteem granted to poets who "were either peasants

or proletarians-Stephen Duck, the Thresher Poet; Mary Collier, the Poetical Washerwoman; Henry Jones, the Poetical Shoemaker-from whose ranks the one aspirant to make good was the Poetical Plowboy, Robert Burns."

Wordsworth was not a "chronological primitivist", being more inclined more towards a form of "cultural primitivism" on the grounds that "Wordsworth's cardinal standard of poetic value is 'nature', and nature, in his usage, is given a triple and primitivistic connotation: Nature is the common denominator of human nature; it is most reliably exhibited among men living 'according to nature' (that is to say, in a culturally simple, and especially a rural environment); and it consists primarily in an elemental simplicity of thought and feeling and a spontaneous and 'unartificial' mode of expressing feeling in words."

In 1802, two years after the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, he wrote:

"I answer, human nature as it has been [and ever] will be. But, where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, [from with]in; by stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves to[wards men] who lead the simplest lives, and most according to nature; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who having known these things have outgrown them."

To this passage Abrams adds from Wordsworth's other statements: "To find 'fair representative of the vast mass of human existence,' we must leave the class of 'gentlemen, professional men, ladies'; we must 'descend lower, among cottages and fields, and among children.' "

What you should note here is the potential for radical revaluations of standard views of not only language as the symbol for social relations, but the critique of contemporary society and the tentative tolerance of exterior notions of civility and cultural refinement.

2.5 IDEAS IN PRACTICE

You can see the ideas we have looked at above in the writings of the poet. Although Wordsworth objected to the poetic diction derived from the eighteenth century, he himself used many of the linguistic mannerisms and formations of the earlier century. But when he talked of the "natural language" of men, Wordsworth was not on sure ground. If he meant rustic speech, he did not show such usage in his own poems. He also modified much of this rustic speech. Sometimes he would distinguish between the different kinds of speech as used by people of different origins and background. Sometimes he used as "rustic speech", a general form of language purified for poetry. Thus Wordsworth also recognised selection as essential for poetic uses of

language. However, his assertion that poetic language is language in a "state of vivid sensation" shows his original recommendation. He laid down that when poetic language is properly selected, it "must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures."

Stop to Consider

Prof. Abrams draws our attention to an interesting feature of Romantic poetry:

"Certain major poets of the Romantic Age . . . incorporated into their writings myths and imagery which are recognizably esoteric in origin. They used such elements, however, as symbolic conveniences, "metaphors for poetry." The older view of the world helped them to define the malaise of their own time, and they sometimes adopted its mythology to project and dramatize their feeling that they did belong in the intellectual, social, and political milieu of their oppressive and crisis-ridden age. This sense of being alien in a world which had been made by man's own unhappy intellect also manifested itself in a widespread revival of the traditional plot-form of the wanderings of an exile in quest of the place where he truly belongs; although, . . .with differences that demarcate sharply the various Romantic quests both from the Plotinian odyssey and the Christian pilgrimage."

Wordsworth believed that the rhetorical figures used in the 18th century were distortions of the original language, as the original language was spontaneous. In a sense, for Wordsworth, the language of poetry falls short of this original language especially as it lacks the passion of the language used by men in former times. Poetic language cannot convey what is uttered in real life by men acting pressure, with passion. To that extent, poetic language cannot match these "emanations of reality and truth." But the early poets used the language actually spoken by men because the occasion which demanded the use of such language was presumably heroic or extraordinary. But Wordsworth was also affected by a regard, like his contemporaries, for folk poetry. On the whole, given that Wordsworth was sensitive to his times and even admired many of the poets of the 18th century, the actual language used in real life came to be different from what was 'natural'. Where poetry was regarded as arising from powerful feelings, Wordsworth saw it as expressing the self, as a release of emotions.

Wordsworth's views on poetic diction are based on the assumption that art and nature are at odds with each other. Throughout his Preface this assumption is at work just as it is made explicit in his long critical essay, *Upon Epitaphs* (1810, 1876). In the third part of his essay, he declares, "I vindicate the rights and dignity of Nature". Alexander Pope had formulated "True Wit" as being "Nature to advantage dressed". So "true expression" would be the appropriate dressing and ornamentation of thoughts. By Wordsworth's standards, however, all forms of such wit are false. For Wordsworth, language cannot be the dress of thought since rhetorical dressing can only distort "genuine" poetry. For him, figures of speech are justifiable only when connected to passion. The typical diction used by the eighteenth-century poets, he considered to be 'artificial', the product of "false refinement or arbitrary innovation", divorced from natural laws, replacing the natural and universal language of human beings. For Wordsworth, poetic language springs from frequent application of figures of speech, mechanically adopted, to "feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connexion whatsoever". Poetic language, in view of this argument, thus was different from the real language of men in any situation.

A.C. Bradley has observed that in the poetry of the Romantics, "the center of interest is inward. It is an interest in emotion, thought, will, rather than in scenes, events, actions...." The lyric poem was at the centre of Romantic poetical theory. Wordsworth and Coleridge both looked to the lyric poem for good poetry. The forms of the lyric poem, ---song, elegy, and ode--- were all cultivated by the poets to a high degree. As Abrams points out, there was a tendency to collapse the "I" of the lyric with the "I" of the poet as person, the poem expressing experiences and those states of mind which could be supported with the testimony of private diaries and letters. This was the principle on which Wordsworth required his readers to read his *Prelude*, and *The Recluse*. The poet stands at the centre of Romantic poetry as well as its criticism.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the status of the poet in Wordsworth's conception of poetry? Support your answer with textual references.

2. Comment on the centrality of the poet in Romantic poetic theory. Illustrate your thesis with references to Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

3. Elaborate on the main features of Wordsworth critical work with particular emphasis on his arguments for a new poetic language.

It seems no accident then that Wordsworth's *Prelude* is, as Wellek observes, "a versified autobiography of 8500 lines". In Book Three of the poem, he says

".....Of genius, power,

Creation and divinity itself

I have been speaking, for my theme has been

What passed within me. Not of outward things

Done visibly for other minds - words, signs,

Symbols or actions - but of my own heart

Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind."

In connection with his understanding of poetic language, you can understand better the poet's concerns if you see what Wordsworth, in his "Note to 'The Thorn' "in the *Lyrical Ballads* , wrote: "It was my wish in this poem to show the manner in which such men cleave to the same ideas, and to follow the turns of passion (always different, yet not palpably different) by which their conversation is swayed. I had two objects to attain: first, to represent a picture which should not be unimpressive, yet consistent with the character that should describe it; secondly (while I adhered to the style in which such persons describe), to take care that words - which in their minds are impregnated with passion - should likewise convey passion to readers who are not accustomed to sympathize with men feeling in that manner, or using such language. It seemed to me that this might be done by calling in the assistance of lyrical and rapid metre. It was necessary that the poem, to be natural, should in reality move slowly. Yet I hoped that by the aid of the metre, to those who should at all enter into the spirit of the poem, it would appear to move quickly." You can see here that Wordsworth saw the capacity of language to evoke, or to reproduce through association perhaps the range of feelings and ideas attributed to the 'rural' folk.

Later in the "Note", he adds: "There is a numerous class of readers who imagine that the same words cannot be repeated without tautology. This is a great error. Virtual tautology is much oftener produced by using different words when the meaning is exactly the same. Words - a poet's words more particularly - ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling, and not measured by the space which they occupy upon paper. For the reader cannot be too often reminded that poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings. Now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character."

Stop to Consider

"The Thorn" (composed between 19 March and 20 April, 1798)
(23 stanzas, 253 lines)

Stanza VI:

"Now would you see this aged thorn,
This pond and beauteous hill of moss,
You must take care and choose your time
The mountain when to cross.
For oft there sits, between the heap
That's like an infant's grave in size
And that same pond of which I spoke,
A woman in a scarlet cloak,
And to herself she cries.
'Oh misery! Oh misery!
Oh woe is me! Oh misery!'

Stanza VII :

"At all times of the day and night
This wretched woman thither goes,
And she is known to every star
And every wind that blows;
And there beside the thorn she sits
When the blue daylight's in the skies,
And when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still,
And to herself she cries,
'Oh misery! Oh misery!
Oh woe is me! Oh misery!'

2.6 SUMMING UP

Having read through this unit you should be well schooled in some of the basic assumptions of Wordsworth's poetic creed. You would have learnt of his conception of poetic language and its origins. It should seem remarkable to you that there is a whole philosophical theory that underpins this conception. In the final analysis, no poetic theory can be significant unless it is moored to conceptions of social relations. The Romantic poets and critics, let us remember, had the entire catastrophe of the revolutionary turmoil in France behind them. The 'Reign of Terror' that grew from these revolutionary beginnings pressed thinkers to re-conceive what had seemed like a new age in 1789. How we should understand the relations between human society and the rest of the environment was a concern that compelled thinkers to considerations of "nature" and perception. In this sense Romantic thought is exciting and invigorating as it radically re-orientates the contents of older forms of thinking. So while, today, Wordsworth may seem limited in the light of later Victorian developments, his criticism reveals those features that make such intellectual departures possible and refreshing.

2.7 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

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Unit 3

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter XIII)

Contents:

3.1 Objectives

3.2 Introducing the Critic

3.3 Reading the Text

3.4 Key concepts

3.4.1 Extract from Chapter 14, *Biographia Literaria*

3.4.2 Poetry as Expression

3.5 The Theory in its Context

3.6 Summing Up

3.7 References/Suggested Readings

3.1 OBJECTIVES

The name of Samuel Taylor Coleridge is deeply imbued with the colours of the Romantic vision of human relations and art and aesthetics. In this unit - which should be read along with the preceding units on Romantic criticism and Wordsworth's critical thinking-you will see in greater detail some aspects of his work. By the end of the unit, your understanding of Coleridge's critical thought should have deepened, as you will

- *connect* the critical principles with the thoughts of other contemporary thinkers
- *gain* a clearer idea of how Coleridge presented his arguments, and
- *be* able to outline Coleridge's principal concerns.

3.2 INTRODUCING THE CRITIC

Coleridge as critic is often remembered for his discussion of fancy and imagination, as well as of poetic diction. He was sensitive to the dualism posed by modern philosophy between self and the world as in the Cartesian

distinction between mind and body -- "To the best of my knowledge Des Cartes was the first philosopher, who introduced the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence, and the body as matter". Coleridge saw philosophies such as materialism and empiricism as projecting nature as lifeless, moving only in accordance with mechanical laws. He appreciated Kant's attempt to resolve this gap between self and nature by positing a connection between the mental faculties and the world of phenomena. However, he did not consider it to have resolved the issue of dualism. He regarded Schelling as holding out the promise of the resolution of this dualism between self and nature.

Coleridge saw knowledge as founded on "the coincidence of an object with a subject". If philosophy is to concentrate on its function of being a science of Being, and for knowledge to become possible, the dualism of the subjective and the objective has to be resolved. This dualism was, however, inherent in modern philosophy. As with Kant, Coleridge saw a transcendental philosophy as recognising a reality beyond our senses but grounded in the senses nonetheless. Subjectivity, or self-consciousness, would thus be the starting point of such a philosophy: "Only in the self-consciousness of a spirit is there the required identity of object and representation". Thus, "I AM" is the fundamental principle of all philosophy.

We should see Coleridge's contributions as a critic in terms of the tenets brought into English Romanticism from German speculative philosophy, tenets that we identify as basic to the Romantic movement and which he helped to lay down:-- those "tenets, aimed in part against the mechanistic, fragmentary, and secular spirit of much Enlightenment thought, include the primacy of subjectivity and self-consciousness, the elevation of nature beyond mere lifeless mechanism to a spiritual status, and the perception of a fundamental unity between the human self and the world of nature." (Habib)

Stop to Consider

Biographical details

We remember Coleridge most for his poems, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", "Frost at Midnight", among others, as well as the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to which he was contributor together with Wordsworth. We also have his *Lectures on Politics and Religion* (1795), his *Lay Sermons* (1816), and *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829) for bulk of his thought on

matters of education, religion and politics. *Biographia Literaria* contains his best contributions to literary criticism and show what other critics have adjudged a worthy attempt to build the philosophical foundations of English criticism.

Born in 1772, Coleridge lived till 1834, eccentric and also remembered for his dependence on laudanum. He left Cambridge in 1794 without a degree, tried to found a society of equals together with the poet Robert Southey, a "pantisocracy" -- a plan which was not realised. He published two journals, *Watchman*, and the *Friend*, and developed a friendship with Wordsworth which both contributed to his own growth as a thinker and poet, and which has been one of the most fruitful collaborations in English literary history. This friendship ran from 1795 till 1810; Coleridge and his (second) wife, Sara, lived close to Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, from 1796. In 1800, they all moved to the Lake District which became the backdrop to many years of fruitful poetic collaboration.

It was Coleridge's sympathy for the radical leader, William Frennd, while at Cambridge, that marked his radicalism. He had expressed support for the French Revolution and also turned to Unitarian beliefs, guided by which he gave many readical speeches in various places. After the French invasion of Switzerland in 1798, Coleridge recanted and reviewed his political beliefs.

Coleridge's sojourn in Germany in 1798, together with the Wordsworths, is another high point in his career as this made possible his study of the German Romantic thinkers.

3.3 READING THE TEXT

Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination is the basis of his theory of literary creation.

In his definition of fancy, Coleridge rated it lower than imagination on the basis that it

"has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites."

Stop to Consider

The eighteenth-century view of imagination

We should keep in mind the fact that the eighteenth-century view of imagination was a development of earlier theories. In the 17th century, 'imagination' and 'fancy' were suggestive of a world of make-believe. The medieval period and then the Renaissance had handed down a close equivalence between "imaginatio" and "phantasia", but where a lighter meaning of less sober retention in memory

was to be signalled, it was "phantasia". In the distinction between the two terms, "imagination" tended to be the more sober mental operation.

"M.H.Abrams helps us with his brief statement: "What we now call the psychology of art had its origin when theorists in general began to think of the mind of the artist as interposed between the world of sense and the work of art, and to attribute the conspicuous differences between art and reality, not to the reflection of an external ideal, but to forces and operations within the mind itself." Within this larger picture, we should note that poetry was allotted a visible role in the production of human knowledge: Francis Bacon, for instance, gave it a prominent place in his map of human knowledge. Thomas Hobbes, in the middle of the seventeenth-century, discussed the production of poetry with reference to fancy, memory, judgment and sense-experience. In discussions of the workings of the mind, most philosophers of the 18th century referred to the literature and the other arts, while almost all critics who conducted systematic investigations into aesthetics, did so in the context of theories of the operations of the human mind.

Connected with this, we must note with Abrams that during the seventeenth century modern psychology developed at the same time as developments came up in natural philosophy in connection with mechanics. Such developments carried great importance for literary criticism. Further, thinkers who concerned themselves with the workings of the literary mind also borrowed from the methods of natural science. This is evident from the claims of thinkers like David Hume, as also David Hartley. In the concept of imagination accepted then, a close connection between sense-impressions and ideas was posited. Images, especially visual images, were taken to be the units of poetic invention. Addison stated in his *Spectator*: "We cannot indeed have a single Image in the Fancy that did not make its first Entrance through the Sight . . .". It was also thought that poetic invention also worked through joining and separating sequences of images. When these images moved across the mind's eye, in the order as they originally arose with the sense-experience, 'memory' is made. When this sequence was changed, it gave a new order of the images of objects which was the said to be the work of 'fancy' or 'imagination'. A term that began to be replaced by 'imagination' was the term, "association". 'Association of ideas' was the phrase put about by John Locke in 1700 and to which later contributions were made by -- as we have already noted -- David Hume as well as David Hartley. Association might be considered, as some then thought, as a way of getting valuable insights into the nature of the world.

In contrast to the 18th way of thinking, Coleridge's theory of mind was, as Abrams points out to us, "like that of contemporary German philosophers, was, as he insisted, revolutionary; it was, . . . part of a change in the habitual way of thinking, in all areas of intellectual enterprise ...".

In Chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge proceeds with the famous description of "fancy" -- that it 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 faculty of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Faculty must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association."

Coleridge is actually using the terms of the associative theory of invention: the "fixities and definites" are the basic elements which are derived from the senses. These are to be differentiated from the units of memory because they are reordered within a new sequence of time and space. This new sequence is based on the laws of association and governed by judgment - an important faculty for the 18th century. But for Coleridge this has another element -- the secondary imagination.

Read the passage again. Coleridge's description of the mind first gives an account of the imagination. "The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary." Before this passage, which should be the focus of your interest, Coleridge works through the ideas of Kant (his work on 'Transcendental Idealism', for example) and the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. The chapter begins with a quotation from *Paradise Lost*. Coleridge quotes lines from *Paradise Lost* more than once. You will find it difficult to read through the early part of this chapter as its references are both philosophical and contemporary. You should also remember that Coleridge borrowed many ideas from the German Idealists.

He also expresses his aim of building/providing a comprehensive explanation within the associative theory. When he comes to his theory of fancy, he focuses on the basic units of the associative theory of invention but he refers to some residual operations of the mind which he names the "secondary imagination".

SAQ:

Do you think the passage above means to say that Coleridge found he had to revise his model of mental operations and thus introduce the 'secondary imagination' to explain exceptional creativity? How, do you think, we can explain "residual operations" in this connection? (30 + 50 words)

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What is the 'primary ' imagination? "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 IAM." Habib draws a parallel between Kant's reproductive imagination and Coleridge's 'primary' imagination. It is a faculty in our normal perception which integrates the various sense-data into images that then become conceptually available to our understanding. In this process, the imagination plays an intermediary role that unites the sensory data with the concepts of understanding. But even here, in this role of the primary faculty, imagination echoes the larger cosmic process -- our perception re-enacts at the finite level the divine act of creation. Human perception thus recreates actively what is to be found in the world of nature. These elements of the world of nature which are copied are reproduced as images that can be further processed by our understanding. This is how we obtain an intelligible perspective on the world. However, this understanding is limited and fragmentary and the primary imagination does not contain originality; it is limited to the experience of the senses and is determined by the laws of associating data.

"The secondary Imagination 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."

Abrams emphasises the importance of Coleridge's conception of the imagination in historical terms: this definition "was the first important channel for the flow of organicism into the hitherto clear, if perhaps not very deep, stream of English aesthetics." 'Organicism' is defined by him "as the philosophy whose major categories are derived metaphorically from the attributes of living and growing things." Memory is "mechanical", according to Coleridge; and 'fancy' is "passive". The imagination, on the other hand, "recreates" its elements by a process to which Coleridge sometimes applies terms Thus, imagination is a 'synthetic', a 'permeative', and a 'blending, fusing power'. At other times, Coleridge describes the imagination as an 'assimilative power', and the 'coadunating faculty'; these adjectives are imported from contemporary biology, where 'assimilate' connoted the process by which an organism converts food into its own substance, and 'coadunate' signified 'to grow together into one'. Often, Coleridge's discussions of imagination are explicitly in terms of a living, growing thing. The imagination is, for example, 'essentially *vital*', it 'generates and produces a form of its own', and its rules are 'the very powers of growth and production'. And in such passages, Coleridge's metaphors for imagination coincide with his metaphors for the mind in all its highest workings. The action of the faculty of reason Coleridge compares in detail to the development, assimilation, and respiration of a plant -- thus equating knowing with growing". As you can see, Prof. Abrams helps us to grasp in full the implications of Coleridge's description of the imagination with reference to what it stands for in the history of literary criticism.

You can also refer to Prof. Wellek's commentary on Coleridge as critic. Coleridge did attempt at theoretical consistency and method. Wellek tells us that he "differs from almost all preceding English writers by his claim to an epistemology and metaphysics from which he derives his aesthetics and finally his literary theory and critical principles. He aimed at a complete systematic unity and continuity even though in practice he left wide gaps." He conceived of the poet as impersonal, not stirred by personal interests but rather motivated towards a grasp of the whole universe. The poet was also, for Coleridge, self-conscious and judicious, but unconscious at the same time. "There is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, this is *the* genius in the man of genius." Coleridge held that the poet works "unconsciously". The poet, for Coleridge, was the man of sensibility as also

the man of passion. He was gifted with a special faculty which was unique to him and to other creators -- the imagination, "the power of unifying things, of being all things. Imagination is the power of objectifying oneself, the Protean self-transforming power of genius." (Wellek). The imagination also mediated between reason and understanding. Like reason, it is independent of space and time and allows poet the scope to dispose with space and time. For Coleridge, the answer to what is poetry is about the same as the answer to the question, what is the poet.

SAQ:

Would you agree with the view that Coleridge is more often a theorist rather than a literary critic? Would you also agree with the view that Coleridge's deepest concern is to evolve a 'theory of criticism' rather than a 'critical theory'? (50 + 70 words)

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What is important about the secondary imagination? It is poetic, it is creative, it synthesizes the data received from the senses into new, complex unities. It assimilates the habitual order and pattern in which we are accustomed to receive the sensory data into new combinations that follow their own logic rather than the customary logic of the laws of association. The secondary imagination belongs to the poet and operates under the control of the will of the poet. This is unlike, we note, the primary imagination which functions involuntarily in everyone. However, the secondary imagination is connected to the primary imagination on which it depends for its primary data. The secondary imagination exerts its creative operations on the impressions entering through the primary imagination. It sees the world at a higher level of truth because it sees through appearances into a deeper reality, into the actual perceptions that it receives via the primary imagination. It perceives deeper connections of objects and events, their finite significances in terms of the comprehensive scheme of the infinite.

We should take note of the fact that Coleridge's exaltation here of the imagination is not a simple reaction to the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on reason. He did, in fact, place the faculty of reason at the highest point of the scale. Coleridge's view of imagination took shape under the influence of thinkers such as Johann Nicolaus Tetens (the psychologist), Kant, and Schelling. As Habib points out, in Coleridge, the poetic, secondary imagination touches both the primary imagination which unifies sense-data to be brought under the concepts of understanding, and reason which unites those concepts into a composite unity. From the German influence Coleridge was led to distinguish between three levels of imagination as also to overturn the traditional hierarchy of fancy as higher power than imagination, a lower power. But fancy, in Coleridge, is not merely restricted to perception; it operates at a lower plane of creativity, being able to exercise some degree of choice in the way it unites images. Thus it is different from the primary imagination. He also calls fancy an "aggregative and associative power", and the imagination, a "shaping and modifying power", or the "esemplastic" power.

Check Your Progress

1. Attempt an explanation of Coleridge's main critical thesis.
2. To what extent does Coleridge draw upon the work of his predecessors to explain his concept of the imagination? Sketch a brief outline of the influences at work on Coleridge.
3. What kind of distinction does Coleridge maintain between 'fancy' and 'imagination'? Give a summary of the argument that Coleridge forwards to support this distinction.

3.4 KEY CONCEPTS

3.4.1 EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER 14, *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA*

"During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry: the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the

truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature.

The thought suggested itself . . . that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be (in part at least) supernatural - and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life. The characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them or to notice them when they present themselves.

"In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical ballads*, in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic - yet so as to transfer, from our inward nature, a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us - an inexhaustible treasure but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand....."

"'What is poetry?' is so nearly the same question with 'what is a poet?' that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. 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 blends and (as it were) *fuses* each into each by that synthetic and magical power to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis* [meaning = 'carried on with slackened reins']), reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement - and, while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry."

3.4.2 POETRY AS EXPRESSION

Romantic thinkers and writers very often referred to poetry as expression. Such a thought was expressed by a thinker like A.W.Schlegel who observed that 'expression' gave the meaning that "the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us". John Stuart Mill remarked that poetry equals "the expression or uttering forth of feeling". In 1818, Coleridge wrote in "Poesy or Art", that the fine arts, "like poetry, are to express intellectual purposes, thoughts, conceptions, sentiments, that have their origin in the human mind". For Hazlitt, poetry *expressed* "the music of the mind." According to Shelley, "poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination" '. With Leigh Hunt, poetry is "the utterance of a passion for truth, beauty and power, embodying and illustrating its conceptions by imagination and fancy, and modulating its language on the principle of variety in uniformity."

Poetry, for the eighteenth century, had been equal to painting: *ut pictura poesis*. In the 19th century, poetry as analogous to image, as representation, becomes the norm. This also implied that poetry is similar to a mirror although often it was conceived that this mirror reflects the state of mind of the poet. So the poet, Novalis, thought poetry is "the representation of the spirit, of

the inner world in its totality." Poetry thus is constituted by images of the state of mind. Poetry was considered to be the equal of music by virtue of the notion that just as music is non-mimetic (not representing anything in external reality), but expressive of emotion and spirit, so is poetry "the music of language, answering to the music of the mind" (Hazlitt).

In Romantic theory, poetry, as Abrams tells us, "is an interaction, the joint effect of inner and outer, mind and object, passion and the perceptions of sense". In the example of Shelley, the Aeolian lyre typified the poetic mind. The Aeolian lyre stood for the poet, while the poem stands for the music that arises from the interaction between external and internal elements (the passage of the wind over the strings produces the music). Hazlitt clearly presented this idea in 1818, in his essay, "On Poetry in General": "The best general definition which I can give of poetry is, that it is the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it."

From Coleridge's "On Poesy or Art" (1818) emerges a similar idea that the essences of nature have their correspondences in the ideas of the mind. Art has the "power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation". Thus poetry is "purely human; for all its materials are from the mind, and all its products are for the mind." We should note here the close correspondence between the poet who observes and the objects of nature that the poet observes. Poetry stands at the junction of the two sides and "it avails itself of the forms of nature to recall, to express, and to modify the thoughts and feelings of the mind." In this conception, the poet's mind is accorded a central position as many critics noted. Thomas De Quincey wrote: "The fact is that no mere description, however visual or picturesque, is in any instance poetic *per se*, or except in and through the passion which presides". Wordsworth asserted that "objects ... derive their influence not from what they are actually in themselves, but from such as are bestowed upon them by the minds of those who are conversant with or affected by those objects."

Coleridge said: "Images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as they

are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion . . . or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit". Coleridge stands out as the Romantic poet most concerned to explore just how the poetic mind modifies the objects perceived through the senses without being untruthful to nature. In the passage quoted above we can see this concern which also animated other Romantic poets. Just how passion modified the inanimate objects of sense, transferring the life of the observer to the objects observed was a preoccupation of Romantic poets. Thus it follows that the Romantic poets' concern is articulated by Wordsworth, "What is a Poet?" The answer, according to him, is that the poet is one "who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of the 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."

As Abrams describes, "The habitual reading of passion, life, and physiognomy into the landscape is one of the few salient attributes common to most of the major romantic poets."

Wordsworth's *Prelude*

The poem is on the topic of the "growth of a poet's mind". It was written in the years 1798 - 1805 and as a "sustained address" to Coleridge, in absentia. The poem is not a straightforward narrative but a recollection of things past from the standpoint of the present. The poem is organised into three stages. In the philosophy of the poem, the subject, spirit or the mind has primacy and thus participates in the larger Romantic Movement. As with the German Idealists, the mind is the power superior even to nature.

Stop to Consider

In an important letter he wrote to Wordsworth on 30 May 1815, Coleridge both expressed and explained his disappointment over Wordsworth's poem, *The Recluse*, of which *The Excursion* was a part.

"Whatever in Lucretius is poetry is not philosophical; whatever is philosophical is not poetry - and in the very pride of confident hope I looked forward to *The Recluse* as the *first* and *only* true philosophical poem in existence. Of course, I expected the colours, music, imaginative life, and passion of *poetry*, but the

matter and arrangement of *philosophy* - not doubting from the advantages of the subject that the totality of a system was not only capable of being harmonized with, but even calculated to aid, the unity (beginning, middle, and end) of a *poem*.

"Of the subjects announced each would have its own appointed place and, excluding repetitions, each would relieve and rise in interest above the other. I supposed you first to have meditated the faculties of man in the abstract; in their correspondence with his sphere of action - first, in the feeling, touch, and taste, then in the eye, and last in the ear; to have laid a solid and immovable foundation for the edifice by removing the sandy sophisms of Locke and the mechanic dogmatists; and demonstrating that the senses were living growths and developments of the mind and spirit in a much juster as well as higher sense than the mind can be said to be formed by the senses. Next I understood that you would take the human race in the concrete, have exploded the absurd notion of Pope's *Essay on Man*, Darwin, and all the countless believers . . .

"In short, the necessity of a general revolution in the modes of developing and disciplining the human mind by the substitutions of life and intelligence . . . for the philosophy of mechanism which in everything that is need worthy of the human intellect strikes *death*, and cheats itself by mistaking clear images for distinct conceptions, and which idly demands conceptions where intuitions alone are possible or adequate to the majesty of the truth. In short, facts elevated into theory, theory into laws, and laws into living and intelligent powers - true idealism necessarily perfecting itself in realism, and realism refining itself into idealism."

3.5 THE THEORY IN ITS CONTEXT

Stop to Consider

From "The Eolian Harp" (Published as "Effusion XXXV", Composed 20 August 1795, at Clevedon, Somersetshire)

"My pensive Sara, thy soft cheek reclined
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is . . .
.....And that simplest lute
Placed lengthways in the clasping casement - hark
How by the desultory breeze caressed!
Like some coy maid half-yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraidings as must needs

Tempt to repeat the wrong. And now its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight elfins make when they at eve" [ll.1-2, 12-21]

From Coleridge's letter to George Dyer, 10 March 1795:

"It is melancholy to think that the best of us are liable to be shaped and coloured by surrounding objects - and a demonstrative proof that man was not made to live in great cities! Almost all the physical evil in the world depends on the existence of moral evil, and the long-continued contemplation of the latter does not tend to meliorate the human heart. The pleasures which we receive from rural beauties are of little consequence compared with the moral effect of these pleasures; beholding constantly the best possible, we at last become ourselves the best possible. In the country, all around us smile good and beauty, and the images . . . are miniaturized on the mind of the beholder as a landscape on a convex mirror."

We can agree with Prof. Abrams that Coleridge works his practical criticism from first principles. His disagreement with Wordsworth, as he claimed, was based on fundamentals. In his *Biographia Literaria*, in contrast to Wordsworth's idea that metre in poetry is "superadded", Coleridge argued that metre is the prerequisite of poetry. "A poem is 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 a distinct gratification from each component part." It follows from this observation that if a poem is defined by a 'purpose', it does not arise from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling". It is thus a deliberate art. "It is the art of communicating whatever we wish to communicate, so as both to express and produce excitement, but for the purpose of immediate pleasure; and each part is fitted to afford as much pleasure, as is compatible with the largest sum in the whole." Each part of the poem is thus a means to achieving the objective of pleasure. Meter, therefore, is a special matter of choice and an imposed manner of arranging words; it is not a superaddition. If the poem is regarded

as an organic or harmonised whole, then it follows that "all parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more important and essential parts".

Poetry needed to be defined after having considered the poem as a product of metrical composition. The problem involved the knowledge that there were great writers who wrote poetically but without metre and whose purpose is truth rather than pleasure. So 'poetry' cannot be limited to the 'poem'. He said, "What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself. . . ."

Coleridge's description of the poet and the poem is striking: "The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity. . . .He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, 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. . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities. . ." Prof. Abrams stresses that this is a new element in English critical thought - the "appeal to inclusiveness as the criterion of poetic excellence". This inclusiveness is the coexistence in a poem of "opposite or discordant qualities", where these are reconciled or blended as one by the synthesizing power of the imagination. He carried his views into the "deduction of the Imagination, and with it the principles of production and of genial criticism in the fine arts." [119 -21]

Check Your Progress

1. Explain Coleridge's conception of the imagination at work.
2. Sketch the argument by which Coleridge integrates imagination, the 'inner and the outer', and poetry as central elements in his poetic theory.
3. Explain Coleridge's doctrine of the 'esemplastic' imagination.
4. Explicate the element of 'organicism' that Coleridge introduces into English literary criticism.

3.6 SUMMING UP

Over this whole unit, you would have seen how Coleridge works differently from his friend, William Wordsworth. You would have also understood that no critical theory can be comprehensive unless it examines minutely the different aspects of its objects. So, Coleridge not merely describes his idea of the imagination but works it into the larger philosophy of social relations, and man-nature relations. Once you understand this larger philosophy you can, not only connect, but also make a deeper assessment of the nature of the critical thought that underlies all of Romantic theorizing. We always stand to gain more from a comprehensive assessment. It is not enough to simply associate Coleridge with his theory of the imagination. That would be tantamount to doing short shrift to the theory. Coleridge's theoretical work appears as part of the best contributions of Romantic thought. In order to grasp this fact, we have given a bit more than a mere description of the subject-matter which will surely be of help to you.

3.7 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

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**Institute of Distance and Open Learning
Gauhati University**

**MA in English
Semester 2**

**Paper VII
Romantic and Victorian Theory and Criticism**

**Block 2
Victorian Critics**



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Block Introduction:

Unit 1 : Victorian Theory and Criticism

Unit 2 : Arnold's The Study of Poetry

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Block Introduction:

You are more likely to associate the Romantic and the Victorian periods in English literary history with poetry, in the case of the first, and with novels and poetry in the case of the second. This is understandable since more often we read the creative productions of the writers dealt with in this block than their critical works. This statement would bear most directly on our familiarity with the Victorian period. But the fact is also true that, as Prof. René Wellek tells us, the Victorians did not continue with the kind of sustained theorizing that critical traditions demanded. In brief, to connect 'Romantic' and 'Victorian' with 'criticism' is based on the reading we bring to these writers through the circumstances of our position and also through the related facts of the prevalence of accepted notions of literary history.

In a way it makes for some comforting common-sense to read the Romantic period's critical thought as the logical outcome of --or even the logical reaction to--what had gone before it in the preceding eighteenth century. The ideas that appear in the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge are based on the opposition to the values so dear to the Enlightenment: rationality, empirical knowledge, the mind as *tabula rasa*, and so on. To the credit of these two famous Romantic figures and what they proposed, their original thought gives flesh to that opposition with a systematic understanding close to the method of a philosophy. You should find Wordsworth's 'Preface' interesting not because he simply worded the argument for democratising poetry, but because he seemed to have anticipated the focus on the problem of language, its origins, its functions in society, etc. As Wimsatt and Brooks have remarked, the question of 'poetic diction' is like shorthand for a range of problems important in literary study.

Poetic language, or the language of verse, involves questions of representation (*mimesis*), of subjectivity, of social relations, and other issues too numerous to be touched upon with compactness. You would know that Coleridge was also involved in the project of the *Lyrical Ballads* and thus whatever Wordsworth discusses in his 'Preface' connects to the sentiments held by Coleridge. In quite a different environment, Arnold turns to the centrality of poetry in social life with an address to the set of concerns that haunted him. As he did not carry out the actual practices of a literary critic, Arnold assumes the vital role of language to be a matter of course. His "touchstones" automatically presume a linguistic sensitivity that can be tested against lines of poetry from a few, chosen poetical works. As a theory, this is not tenable as it leaves much of criticism to subjective criteria. But all this does not detract from his insights into the role of literary enterprise in society and the possible horizons of literary criticism.

Our method, in the units below, has been to bring to you some of the concepts that the critics have turned their attention to. A running theme in the work of the three critics whom we have given more space, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, is the issue of the status of poetry. This is not only because all three were poets in their own right but because also on account of the stage of literary history that had been reached; the different cultural spaces occupied by poetry and prose, in the form of novels, posed questions of importance and relevance for the poet. Our awareness of these circumstantial aspects of the history of criticism makes our readings more comprehensive.

Again, as in all our units, do try out all the self-assessment questions. Read the supplementary information that we bring to you. Your reading of these critics will be richer and more sound.

Contents of Block 2:

Unit 1 Victorian Theory & Criticism

Unit 2 Arnold's The Study of Poetry

Unit 1

Victorian Theory & Criticism

Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Historical Background
- 1.3 Important Figures
- 1.4 Other Victorian Thinkers
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 References/Suggested Readings

2.1 OBJECTIVES

By reading this unit you will be able to get a better grasp of the set of ideas that we normally associate with the thinkers of the Victorian period. We are hopeful that by the time you have worked through this unit, you will be able to

- *name* the thinkers that we include among Victorian critics
- *connect* these thinkers to the concepts brought up by these thinkers
- *describe* the achievements of Victorian critical thinking

2.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We should remember that the Victorian critical trend comes on the heels of the Romantic period, around the exact middle of the nineteenth century. René Wellek notes that the principles of romantic thought "systematically propounded by Coleridge had not taken firm root in England, though it was upheld, in various versions, by Lamb and Hazlitt, and after their death by a few survivors such as De Quincey and Leigh Hunt." New ideas appear through writers and critics whose main achievements lay in fields other than the literary. Thus we have the names of Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Babington Macaulay and John Ruskin.

Literary ideas in the form of theories and critical standards underwent transformation around this time with newer attitudes like utilitarianism (which applied the standards of utility to decide the value of everything) and an Evangelicalism which distrusted art as "secular and frivolous". What is called "Victorianism" (a didacticism which sprang from utilitarian ideas and an

evangelical distrust of art) was coming into existence in these attitudes. It came together with much "literary antiquarianism" (a backward turn to collecting additional information about the literary past), and a widening interest in literary history. Wellek describes this lucidly as he traces the roots of such attitudes to the preceding 18th century: "The intense interest in older English literature had its patriotic overtones, connected with the resurgence of English nationalism during the Napoleonic wars, and reflected a general change of taste: the new enjoyment of medieval and particularly of Elizabethan literature. But these motives behind the revival of older English literature quickly decayed, and its study became, more and more, the exclusive domain of the literary antiquarian whose ethos was an indiscriminate love of the past, a worship of new facts, and a mildly scientific curiosity." Some areas of interest within literature included Anglo-Saxon studies, the study of medieval romances, folk songs and ballads, and Elizabethan literature. (We learn that the word "folklore" comes in 1846.) Plays by Marlowe, Greene, Middleton, Ford, and Webster became accepted subjects of criticism while there were reprints of many plays and new editions of Elizabethan criticism. Through such interests it was now possible to write English literary history for the first time. Some foreign literatures were also brought into this circle of interest: German, Spanish, Danish, Slav literatures, modern Greek, and the Oriental literatures. Although literary historiography did not emerge in full form at this time, we have the names of Robert Chambers, Henry Hallam, John Dunlop, as also Thomas Carlyle associated with it.

Stop to Consider

Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881): We are reminded that "Today Carlyle excites hatred or boredom rather than admiration. He is considered a forerunner of Hitler, a worshipper of supermen heroes for whom "might makes right". . . Carlyle's style militates against any revival of his writings. Its repetitive, loud-voiced, emphatic, mannered grandiloquence, the whole biblical pathos . . .repels the present-day reader who does not know the quieter stretches of Carlyle's writings . ." But Carlyle was also, finally, a social thinker, historian, stylist, literary critic, and an 'interpreter of German literature'.

John Stuart Mill (1806-73): Mill's father, James Mill, was probably the most prominent disciple of Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, and educated his son in the spirit of rationalism. Utilitarianism, being driven by attitudes held by a society favouring commerce, science, and technological progress, had no use for poetry. But J.S.Mill, going against intellectual bent of his father and Bentham, upheld the values of poetry as to be found in his essays of 1833, "What Is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry". Mill tried to reconcile poetry with knowledge and philosophy and for most of his life devoted himself to economics, logic, and sociology. From Mill we get the famous phrases, "Eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" (while distinguishing between poetry and rhetoric) and

"Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener". From this latter thought we obtain the idea that "all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy".

Thomas Babington Macaulay(1800 - 1859): He did not count himself a great literary critic although he is now remembered as poet, historian, and politician. For us, in India, he is associated with the derogatory remarks he made on Indian learning and with the Minutes formulated on the subject in 1835. However, as a literary critic, he is mentioned for some commentary he delivered on the poets, especially figures of the late 17th- and 18th-centuries.

John Ruskin (1819 - 1900) : He is remembered mainly for the "aesthetics propounded in the first three volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843, 1846, 1856) and later to his social teachings, in which art assumes a central place." As Wellek emphasizes the point, that "he held a theory of art (and literature) which is far from incoherent or even old-fashioned, but is an impressive restatement of romantic organicism."

Wellek's reading of this period may be of use as a description:

"It would not be unfair to say that around 1850 English criticism had reached a nadir in its history: the great romantics, Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb, had died in the thirties; Carlyle, the strongest figure after them, had relinquished criticism for history and social pamphleteering; Macaulay and Mill were no longer concerned with criticism. The camp followers of the great romantics, De Quincey and Leigh Hunt, both lived till 1859, but were only pale ghosts of their youth. Poetic theory was practically nonexistent or simply a remote derivative of popularized romanticism: genius, imagination, sincerity of feeling, the moral and finally social function of the poet were the constant themes of perfunctory discussion ultimately derived from Wordsworth.

Still, a revival of English criticism was just around the corner. It came about in various and often devious ways. One could sort out the different motives by pointing to a new historicism, a new classicism, a new realism, and finally a new aestheticism which opposed the all-pervading Victorian atmosphere of didacticism and moralism. But these motives are not clearly set off from one another: they combine, they enter into compromises, they attempt genuine syntheses." [Vol.IV: *The Later Nineteenth Century*]

As you read this passage above, you can note that in terms of the history of criticism, the Victorian period does not stand out as a the high point of English criticism. But Wellek traces some of the new trends like a revised historicism, a fresh sense of the meaning of realism, a revised sense of what classicism meant - all these contributed towards a new turn in critical standards.

Stop to Consider

Literary Criticism in relation to European currents of critical thought

"In the later nineteenth century, the vast unifying systems of thinkers such as Hegel, as well as the unifying visions of the Romantics, collapsed into a series of one-sided systems, such as utilitarianism, positivism, and social Darwinism. To be sure, there were a number of movements that continued the oppositional stance of Romanticism to mainstream bourgeois and Enlightenment ideals: Matthew Arnold criticized the philistinism of bourgeois society, while Thomas Carlyle promoted his own version of German idealism, and John Ruskin perpetuated a Romantic idealization of the Middle Ages. A tradition of alternative philosophy, often pessimistic, was inaugurated by Schopenhauer and ran through thinkers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Bergson. More politically forceful were the various movements of socialism inspired by Marx, Engels, and others.

"..... As the culmination of a historical pattern beginning in the Renaissance, science effectively displaced religion and theology as the supreme arbiter of knowledge. The economic and social forces mentioned above had led to the institutional demise of religion. Scientific development and broadly scientific attitudes intensified this process....

"...the natural sciences became the model and the measure of other disciplines. The broadest name for this emulation of science is positivism, which derives its name from those self-proclaimed "positive" philosophies of thinkers such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim in France, and Herbert Spencer in England. These thinkers wished to exclude from investigation all hypotheses that were not empirically verifiable, and they rejected as "metaphysical" all inquiries that were not ultimately reducible to supposedly scientific terms of analysis, such as "matter", "motion", and "force"."

[M.A.R.Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism*]

1.3 IMPORTANT FIGURES

From among the figures associated with the expression of views on art and literature during the Victorian period, you have already been introduced to some of the better known figures. There were many others also - Thomas De Quincey (1785 - 1859), Leigh Hunt (1784 - 1859), Matthew Arnold (1822 - 1888), Walter Bagehot (1826 - 1877), and Leslie Stephen (1832 - 1904), for instance.

Leigh Hunt was definitely influenced by Coleridge's theory of imagination. He praised what had been said of Wordsworth by Coleridge as "the finest lecture on the art of poetry in the language". He wrote the introduction to the anthology of extracts from Chaucer to Keats, entitled *Imagination and Fancy* (1844), calling it "In Answer to the Question: What Is Poetry?" where he formulated his principles most clearly. He was one of the first to recognise Keats's merit and to make the biographical sketch. He was also among the first "to emphasize the peculiar greatness and fineness of Coleridge's poetry" and to uphold Shelley. He gave favourable reviews to early collections of the

Tennysons and also praised Elizabeth Barrett Browning for *Aurora Leigh* and *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Hunt is to be remembered as "a propagandist of imaginative "pure" poetry, as a mediator of older Italian literature, as an early champion of Keats and Shelley."

Thomas De Quincey has also been described as "a minor Coleridge", even being referred to as "the adjective of which Coleridge was the substantive". However, De Quincey differed vastly in opinion from Coleridge and indeed can be better understood as following Wordsworth. He stated: "For the most sound criticism on poetry, or any subject connected with it that I have ever met with, I must acknowledge my obligations to many years' conversation with Mr. Wordsworth." As Wellek points out, "in literary theory, De Quincey belongs not to the Coleridgean and German dialectical symbolism but to the empirical psychological tradition of the British and to the emotionalist trend, descending from Dennis through Hartley to Wordsworth." De Quincey distinguished between the literature of power and the literature of knowledge. Despite the use of the terms, De Quincey's formulation did not, however, make clear that by "power" he meant 'emotional impact'. (The confusion can be caused by the way in which, in other instances, we can equate knowledge with power.) You can read his famous little essay, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823) for his perceptive analysis of an important scene in the play.

Stop to Consider

From De Quincey's "On the Knocking at the Gate, in *Macbeth*"

"From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*. It was this: the knocking at the gate, which succeeds to the murder of Duncan, produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was, that it reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavored with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see why it should produce such an effect."

"In *Macbeth*, for the sake of gratifying his own enormous and teeming faculty of creation, Shakspeare has introduced two murderers: and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated: but, though in *Macbeth* the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and his feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her,--yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both. This was to be expressed; and on its own account, as well as to make it a more proportionable antagonist to the unoffending nature of their victim, "the gracious Duncan," and adequately to expound "the deep damnation of his taking off," this was to be expressed with peculiar energy. We were to be made to feel that the human nature, i.e., the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man,--was gone, vanished, extinct; and that the fiendish nature had taken its place. And, as this

effect is marvellously accomplished in the dialogues and soliloquies themselves, so it is finally consummated by the expedient under consideration; and it is to this that I now solicit the reader's attention."

"All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now apply this to the case in Macbeth. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed;" Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated--cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs--locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested--laid asleep--tranced--racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them."

[Excerpts downloaded from Project Gutenberg's edition of the essay]

Matthew Arnold is undoubtedly the most important name in the history of English criticism in the later nineteenth century. His eminence as a critic is secured by virtue of his stature as a commentator on English society and culture in general. Wellek comments: "Today both in England and in the United States - especially in academic circles - his influence is still felt. It is rather the influence of his Kulturphilosophie than of his literary criticism, but among critics of the 20th century Irving Babbitt, T.S.Eliot, F.R.Leavis, and Lionel Trilling show marked affinities with his outlook."

SAQ

Attempt an analysis of Wellek's view of the state of English criticism at this time. Do you think his opinion can be justified on the basis of historical arguments? Some of these reasons may even be sociological, or political, rather than being purely 'literary'. (80 words)

.....
.....
.....

You should learn of Walter Bagehot as the critic who seems to be 'symptomatic' of Victorian writing. We are told by Wellek that Bagehot is "limited, preoccupied with the normal, distrustful of everything eccentric, even Philistine in the Arnoldian sense". But we are also reminded that he "hit upon an important theme: the "type," which almost simultaneously engaged the attention in France and Dobrolyubov in Russia. He gave it an original twist with concept of "egotistical," "self-delineative," but representative poetry." Bagehot made an attempt to explore this scheme in his essay, "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning: or Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry" (1864), in which he says, "The business of the poet is with types; and those types are mirrored in reality." Bagehot writes: "The poet must find in that reality, the literatesque man, the literatesque scene, which nature intends for him, and which will live in his page."

Leslie Stephen was the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* to which he alone contributed 378 articles. He wrote five volumes for the *English Men of Letters* series; was a moral philosopher; a historian of ideas who wrote *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) and *The English Utilitarians* (1900). But other commentators have questioned his critical status (although Q.D.Leavis has valued his critical abilities with the words, "Cambridge critic").

Check Your Progress

1. Attempt a survey of the main critical works of the major thinkers of Victorian England.
2. Make a comparative study of the critical ideas of the main Victorian literary critics.

1.4 OTHER VICTORIAN THINKERS

We should be aware that besides the critics we have already looked at above, there were other writers and thinkers in the period who also made some contributions to the body of thought that we know as "criticism".

One stream of thought enters onto the scene through what is known as the "aesthetic movement". In this connection, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is regarded as an important source, especially through their journal, *The Germ*, which finally ran only four numbers in 1850. In this magazine were set out ideas based on pure naturalism and on medievalism espoused by its contributors such as Holman Hunt, F.G.Stephens and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (You will read about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at greater length in the block on

Victorian poetry in Paper 14. So we shall not expand this point here.) The names of Swinburne and Walter Pater assume much importance in this context.

Algernon C. Swinburne (1837 - 1909) declared, in his book on William Blake (1868) that, "Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her (or if not she need hardly be overmuch concerned); but from the man who falls to artistic work with a moral purpose, shall be taken away even that which he has." However, we should not believe that Swinburne was an uncompromising supporter of art or poetry without substance. His literary judgments were often too extreme to be sustainable. Swinburne stands out as a pioneering critic of Blake's poetry but we can also note that he differed in his assessment of the romantic poets from Arnold. Wellek's estimate of him - "he was a genuine critic who succeeded in defining and upholding a specific coherent taste for the imaginative sublime and the moment of poetic magic. . . the first in England to apply purely imaginative standards to the whole range of literature without too many concessions to purely moralistic, realistic, or philosophical standards."

Walter Pater (1839-1894) is now often dismissed as an "impressionistic" critic. But it is also correct to note that Pater went beyond the limited personal pleasure to the "duty of the critic to grasp the individuality, the unique quality of a work of art." He wrote on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb and the Pre-Raphaelites. His book on The Renaissance (1873) is a discussion, as much of art, as of literary matters. In his famous essay, "On Style" (1889), he explored the subject and apprehended the need for intellectual labour and classical restraint: "In truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplus age." Towards the end of the essay Pater's stand regarding the value of art in relation to subject matter becomes dichotomous.

Stop to Consider

The English Aesthetic Movement

Against a larger backdrop of realism and naturalism which held sway in European literature as also in America, beginning around the 1840s, poets like Charles Baudelaire in France were occupied with other subjects like language, poetic form, the access to the innermost core of human subjectivity and the evocation of mental states. Partly, these concerns were traceable back to the Romantics as also to a rejection of the newer values associated with an industrialized, urban life given to commerce and utilitarian values. You have already encountered the name of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in this connection. This anti-realist and anti-bourgeois stream of thought was also to be found in the ideas of the Parnassian poets in France who followed the ideals of Théophile Gautier and Leconte de Lisle (1818 - 1894), who upheld "art for art's sake". Similarly, such ideas flowered in the theories of poetic composition propounded by Edgar Allan Poe. Those who were associated with the French symbolists, and espoused

such aestheticism, were the followers of Baudelaire. These included Paul Verlaine (1844 - 1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854 - 1891), and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 - 1898).

The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) by Arthur Symons introduced French symbolism into England. Symons described the preceding few decades of the later nineteenth century as "the age of science, the age of material things". He defined the symbolist movement as "a revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition" which heralded a "turn of the soul" with "a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream".

Walter Pater's famous phrase "art for art's sake" echoed the influence on him of the Renaissance paintings of Florence and other places. He defined the object of criticism in his preface to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* differently from Arnold (to "see the object as in itself it really is") with his recognition that, in thus seeing the object of criticism, we actually learn about our own subjectivity - "to know one's own impression as it really is, is to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly".

The famous preface to 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' stands as Oscar Wilde's statement of his aesthetic outlook: the "artist is the creator of beautiful things"; "All art is quite useless."; "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." Wilde's most important views on art are set out in "The Critic as Artist" in the form of a dialogue. His most important statement intimately relates art and criticism:

"the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing ... Certainly it is never trammelled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever . . . That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul."

John Addington Symonds (1840 - 1893) is often thought of as following the ideas of Walter Pater. But we are alerted by Wellek to the view that we would be mistaken to think of him as an "aesthete". Symonds averred that, "Art exists for humanity". As we learn, Symonds' work "is intellectual and rational in style and even scientific in pretension. Symonds expounds a cosmic evolutionism, a modernized Hegelianism." In the essay, "On the Application of Evolutionary Principles to Art and Literature" (contained in his *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* of 1890), we can find Symonds' application of the ideas of evolution, with borrowings from Hegel, pantheism, Wordsworth, Goethe, and Whitman. From this standpoint, Symonds was brought up against the question of the status of criticism in the light of evolution which placed artistic development within a cycle. Wellek rates Symonds' book, *Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama*, as his best because "it reflects the peculiar combination of scientific evolutionism with evocative description and good appreciative criticism; it is one of the few great achievements of English literary historiography in the 19th century."

Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900) is another writer whose ideas regarding art, literature and critical standards are not always acceptable or tenable. Some of his opinions can be traced back to Pater, Arnold, Swinburne, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Poe. However, "The very extremism of his formulas, the scintillating wit, the inverting of commonplaces, the studied anticlimaxes shock us into awareness of issues often hidden by reasonable argumentation conscientiously weighing the pros and cons." At times he would propound a "pan-aestheticism" which sees art as embracing all life, and life to be lived for the sake of art. This is not the same as art for art's sake which declares art to be autonomous. At yet other times Wilde, as in his 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', saw extreme aestheticism as containing the seeds of moral corruption. There are also statements by Wilde that carry weight: "Form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art: they are always one. But for the purpose of analysis, and setting the wholeness of aesthetic impression aside for the moment, intellectually we can so separate them." We should note that Wilde regarded realism as failure as a method.

George Bateman Saintsbury (1845 - 1933) is remembered as possibly the most influential academic literary historian and critic of the early twentieth century. The bulk of his writings is enormous, indeed so vast, that the "sheer bulk and scope of his writings have prevented an adequate discussion." Perhaps we should limit ourselves to observing that Saintsbury holds up different critical standards for poetry and for the novel, while drama is gathered to poetry. Concerning poetry, his thinking is similar to Swinburne and Pater (and Baudelaire, even Leigh Hunt, De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Lamb) and he maintains a thoroughly formalist stance. He saw criticism as based on personal sensibility and taste. In this sense he was averse to theorising. He was criticised for the neglect of theoretical principles in his voluminous *History of Criticism*, to which he replied: "The complement of Theory I do not pretend to supply, and I cannot see that anybody has a right to demand it." Wellek sums up his description of Saintsbury with the words - "Saintsbury does not succeed in strictly separating his artistic judgment from ideological or national prejudices and in achieving his idea of universal learning and personal impression. But one should recognize his great merits as a mapmaker in the *History of Criticism* and as a lively commentator and surveyor of modern literary history, at least of England and France."

SAQ

Find out the major works by (i) Oscar Wilde , and (ii) by George Saintsbury.
(90 + 90 words)

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George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950) is named by Prof. Wellek as nearly the "anti-Victorian critic" by virtue of being "the enemy of hypocrisy and smugness, the self-proclaimed destroyer of bourgeois values." But we should note Wellek's observation that "In spite of his professed break with tradition Shaw belongs to the Victorian propounders of realism, common sense, and optimism, and the enemies of romanticism and pessimism." We should remember that Shaw had been a drama critic in *The Saturday Review* just as George Henry Lewes had done for *The Leader* before him. Shaw acknowledged similarities between himself and Lewes in this connection. Before his work as drama critic Shaw had been an advocate of Ibsen's work which was crystallized in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. As he reviewed the English stage in the 1890s, the theatre in England was only gradually renewing itself through some imitative works borrowed from the French apart from the familiar re-workings of Shakespeare's plays. There were also some un-remarkable plays by Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero. Shaw's drama criticism helped in a re-assessment of Shakespearean drama. On the whole, as Prof. Wellek remarks, Shaw does not display much prowess as a literary critic.

1.5 SUMMING UP

Through reading this unit above, you have learnt that while we will, for the university curriculum, talk only about Matthew Arnold below (in the next unit) as a Victorian critic, there were many other critics who discussed and debated art, poetry and literature in more generalised terms at the same time. Even while we talk of only a few names in the history of criticism, there are many more that we have left out. Don't you now think that we are far too utilitarian to learn well ? I think that is how we should understand our own situation. You have seen many names you will not discuss but we have tried to give you a very brief idea of some dialogues that went on intellectually during the period. You will see the name of George Saintsbury on many books

in our own university. That itself shows how important he was as a critic in the early twentieth-century. You would know G.B.Shaw better as a dramatist but here you will see that he made some effort to theorize on drama. We have added portions from De Quincey's famous essay so that you get the flavour of his criticism at first hand and do not miss out on such a famous piece of work. We cannot do without mentioning Bagehot, Pater, Ruskin, Leigh Hunt, and others who will always figure among those to be remembered as belonging to the Victorian age. So, at the very least, you will be able to mention against these names the ideas that are left behind by them.

1.6 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Duncan Wu (ed.) : *Romanticism : An Anthology*. Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1996
2. M. A. R.Habib: *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Blackwell Publishing, Indian Reprint 2006
3. René Wellek: *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750 - 1950, Vol.2: The Romantic Age*. Jonathan Cape, London, 1955
4. M. H. Abrams: *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. W.W.Norton & Company Ltd., 1971, First South Asian Edition 2002
5. M. H. Abrams: *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 1953, Indian Edition 2006

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Unit 2

Arnold's The Study of Poetry

Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives**
- 2.2 Introducing the Critic**
- 2.3 Reading the Text**
- 2.4 Key Concepts**
- 2.5 Ideas at Work**
- 2.6 Summing Up**
- 2.7 References/Suggested Readings**

2.1 OBJECTIVES

As you study the historical background of literary criticism, albeit with a special focus on selected important figures, you must learn not only to identify the topics that critics raise for more discussion but also to place these topics against the whole backdrop of what critics have largely been engaged in studying. That is, both the larger picture together with the smaller one must be clear to you. As you work through the unit given below, you should be able to

- *relate* Arnold's thoughts with other Victorian discussions of art and literature
- *explain* the topics that Arnold discusses
- *explore* the range of ideas that Arnold deals with

2.2 INTRODUCING THE CRITIC

Matthew Arnold is a critic who seems to speak in a language close to our own times. In other words, very often his preoccupation with the status of poetry, his analyses of contemporary society and even his manner of expressing it shows him to be even urgently projecting a world which is post-Victorian. In a sense, he is critical of his society because he sees its weaknesses and these weaknesses, according to his vision, disable it from addressing the future with competence. You should understand that Arnold can be considered as a

humanist who, through his literary criticism, attempts to address larger issues of social trends and current attitudes.

Some of the issues that Arnold takes up for consideration had been given some thought even by earlier thinkers. But what Arnold does is to re-consider some of these older problems with fresh insights as also to bring up some newer areas of thought.

We remember Arnold as poet, critic and educator. His father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, was headmaster at Rugby, one of the most prestigious public schools of England, and was famous for having initiated some educational reforms. Arnold is a social and cultural critic deeply involved with cultural malaise in his society. Matthew Arnold was educated at Rugby and Oxford. He became Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1857; during this decade, the 1850s, he wrote most of his poetry. His social and literary criticism appeared in *Essays in Criticism*, (first series; 1865), *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *Essays in Criticism* (second series; 1888), and *Literature and Dogma* (1873).

SAQ

What is the particular tenor of Arnold's critical statements ? (50 words)

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2.3 READING THE TEXT

This was the 'General Introduction' to *The English Poets* (edited, T.H.Ward) of 1880. Later on, it was included in his *Essays in Criticism* of 1888. Today, for us, post-Derrida, and under the looming shadows of global recession and global warming, Arnold's essay sparkles with vigour, confidence and the assurance of the Victorian critic. The hope he sees in poetry is extremely high, perhaps understandable when seen as coming after the Romantic vision of the exalted status of poetry as a source of authentic knowledge. "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry." You should observe that nowhere in this essay does Arnold talk of poetry as affording us ordinary pleasure. We can almost recall what Philip Sidney had said in his "Apology for Poetry" regarding poetry to be the highest form of learning.

Arnold's emphasis on this point begins his search for the proper criteria to judge poetry with. In this essay, Arnold places great emphasis on seriousness. He is anxious to separate the good poetry from the bad: "if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence." This concern entails the definition of poetry as well: it is "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty". In order to get "the best poetry" that will provide the criticism of life, it is imperative that the critic be aware of what is the best to be obtained from poetry. He argues against the pitfalls of the "real estimate" of poetry -- the "historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious." The pervasive sense of history that nineteenth century promoted is felt by Arnold to interfere with aesthetic criteria. Arnold is, here, an advocate of aestheticism who sees art as measurable only by standards innate to itself. This colours his argument: "The course of development of a nation's language, thought, and poetry, is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is, we may come to use a language of quite exaggerated praise in criticising it; in short, to overrate it."

The other 'estimate' is equally pernicious, although often deducible. This is "the fallacy caused by an estimate which we may call personal." Arnold is often aware of the arguments that may run counter to his own. So when he rates the different kinds of classics, he acknowledges the possibility of overlooking the "real classic" although he does not clarify what the term covers. Arnold's terms make the definition difficult: "To trace the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses, the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end." The investigation of 'historic origins' however leads away from the true enjoyment of poetry, turning our attention to features that do not constitute the "benefit" of poetry in reality.

SAQ

When do the two kinds of fallacious estimates become active - in the consideration of modern or the ancient poets? Can you find the reasons for this? (60 + 40 words)

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Arnold is clearer in drawing out the ways in which the two kinds of fallacies operate: the poets of the past tend to tempt us to an historical estimate, while the judgment of poets of the present traps us with a personal estimate. The first kind of entrapment is to be seen when anachronistic comparisons are made --- Caedmon equated with Milton; Taillefer's chant compared to epics. Arnold returns criticism to the established classics: Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton. When we come to his reasons for making these writers as the arbiters of our literary taste, then we are brought to ideas which are abstract. He mentions "the very highest poetical quality" which is to be found in the writers named earlier but he leaves it to us to consider the contents of that "quality". He admits the possibility of confusion: "Critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality in poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples;-- to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest, quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic." We might turn around and find Arnold in practice surrendering to the same 'historical' estimate that he warned us of. For us today, Arnold's critical terms -- the "infallible touchstone" -- are far too abstract to help us. After the 'close reading' techniques of the New Criticism of the twentieth century, we make far greater use of textual hair-splitting (Eliot gave the name "lemon-squeezer" criticism). For Arnold's dictum to be successful, the study of poetry must first be based on extensive knowledge of the Graeco-Roman heritage, and knowledge of the great canons of western literature.

In the next few paragraphs, (l.383 onwards) Arnold brings round his discussion to the question of French romance-poetry by Christian of Troyes and the application of the "historical estimate". For us, the discussion of Chaucer's status as an English poet is highly interesting for the light it sheds on the relation of English poetry to French traditions in the context of the historical relations between these two nations. However, Arnold rates Chaucer below Dante: "And yet, I say, Chaucer is not one of the great classics. He has not their accent. What is wanting to him is suggested by the mere mention of the name of the first great classic of Christendom, the immortal poet who died eighty years before Chaucer,-- Dante." What Arnold names as Chaucer's weakness is a lack of the quality by which poetry achieves its high purpose - - "The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness." Yet Arnold reveals an eclecticism in his judgment: "He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and

corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry." By the "real estimate", Chaucer has "sterling value".

SAQ

How would you distinguish between the "real estimate" and the "personal estimate"? (60 words)

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Arnold's estimate of the work of Dryden and Pope is striking: "Though they may write in verse, though they may in a certain sense be masters of the art of versification, Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose." Gray is rated as 'classic' but the evaluations become more difficult as Arnold ranges over the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries: "We enter now on times where the personal estimate of poets begins to be rife, and where the real estimate of them is not reached without difficulty." Robert Burns is taken up for consideration as Arnold attempts to show the workings of his method of estimation of poetry. Surprisingly, Arnold does not seem to be affected by his own inconsistencies: Burns's poetry is not 'classic', nor is the poetry "a criticism of life and a virtue like theirs; but a poet with thorough truth of substance and an answering truth of style, giving us a poetry sound to the core." Arnold remarks that "perhaps it is by the perfection of soundness of his lighter and archer masterpieces that he is poetically most wholesome for us". We could re-frame his argument to show that while Arnold works with an acute sense of what makes poetry classic, he does not clarify the practical steps by which we can evaluate new writing. This last is perhaps the most critical operation that a critic conducts. The subjectivity implicit in literary judgment is clearly brought out by Arnold but he does not frame the method by which this subjectivity can be overcome, if at all. If the subjectivity could be seen as the consequence of a complex aggregate of various factors, Arnold does not attempt to outline. One reason may have been that Arnold was also implicitly concerned to bring to the fore the epistemological status of poetry, particularly within the wide scope of social transition.

Check Your Progress

1. Describe the context of Arnold's criticism and show the larger concerns which he tried to address.
2. Outline Arnold's conception of poetic worth.

2.4 KEY CONCEPTS

We need to refer to Arnold's conception of poetry itself. When he called poetry "criticism of life", he did not implicitly confuse poetry and philosophy, or creativity and criticism. Arnold did, elsewhere, state that "no one will be much helped by Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature, as a scheme in itself and disjoined from his poems." He was clearly far from confusing systematic philosophy with the the world-view that poetry embodies. He did revise his early definition of poetry as "criticism of life" by adding to it the condition that it is "criticism of life" "under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." The dictum stemmed from his understanding that rather than being a source of enjoyment only, poetry (or literature) is additionally a source of knowledge. His hopes for poetry being "immense", Arnold called for "high seriousness" (his translation of Aristotle's 'spoudaiotes') if poetry had to be great. The phrase seems, at first glance, to imply heavy sobriety but as Wellek points out, Arnold's "high seriousness" was not meant to imply "churchyard solemnity". Arnold thought of poetry as being next to religion-- but poetry, as being infused with "joy" and "healing power", capable of speaking to the "great primary human affections". For these qualities he valued the poetry of Wordsworth and Goethe, also Thomas Gray and Shelley. At the same time, he denied Chaucer's verse the distinction of having 'high seriousness'.

Poetry, for Arnold, was "simply the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of saying things". It was "the most delightful and perfect form of utterance that human words can teach". Poetry's role is to interpret the natural world and the moral world. He held that "poetry is interpretative both by having natural magic in it, and by having moral profundity. In both ways it illuminates man; it gives him a satisfying sense of reality; it reconciles him with himself and the universe." Arnold was clear in his understanding that poetry is not merely didactic. He quoted from Milton to show that poetry should be "simple, sensuous, passionate". Thus he saw poetry as the product of emotion and reason, or imagination and reason -- "imaginative reason." It was partly from such a conception that Arnold devalued the poetry "conceived and composed in [the poets] wits", as in 18th-century poetry. Genuine poetry

is, for him, "conceived and composed in the soul". For Arnold the "inward" capacities of a human being were of the utmost importance in the face of the threat received from modern-day mass civilization which equated wealth and success with industrial output. In this connection, Arnold's notion of "culture" assumes a vital role.

In "The Function of Criticism", Arnold gives to the critical faculty a lower status than the creative. He proposed that "A time of true creativity . . . must inevitably be preceded amongst us by a time of criticism". The two faculties are balanced in the overall effect of their complementary roles. He suggested that "the creation of a modern poet . . . implies a great critical effort behind it". This was true of poets like Sophocles, Pindar, Shakespeare and Goethe who received a "current of ideas" through critical effort. The fact that the English Romantics did not have a comparable intellectual framework caused deficiencies in their work -- they "did not know enough" -- and the reason for this could be found in the French Revolution which did not have the "disinterestedly intellectual and spiritual" character of movements like the Renaissance and the Reformation. The job of criticism is to bring in "the best that is known and thought in the world, and ... in turn making this known" so as to "create a current of true and fresh ideas". Arnold prescribes the limits of criticism: it should be free of political, practical interests. Its purpose is to lead us "towards perfection, by making [our minds] dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things". Religion and politics lead the critic astray and the critic must also beware the vice of insularity, looking to "Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; . . . whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one other". Criticism maintains its detachment from the practical sphere by "following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches." It does not lend itself "to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas."

When writing of the Greeks, Arnold observed that Homer wrote in the "grand style". This description was applied by him again while referring to Milton. He commented, that "the grand style arises in poetry, when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject". In his important essay of 1880, "On the Study of Celtic Literature and On Translating Homer", Arnold is preoccupied with "style" or "manner" along with "matter" and "substance". We should see here that Arnold was clearly moving towards articulating the problem of the relation of form and matter. It has been shown by later critics that Arnold's idea of the "grand style" is reminiscent of the 'sublime' as expounded by Longinus. You should recall that

in the Longinian sense, the 'sublime' was connected to what was felt or expressed by a 'great soul'. This meaning becomes clear when Arnold's description of other poets like Sophocles or Keats is taken into consideration.

The grand style calls for a subject of matching proportions. Such a style "arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject". Of this kind two examples are obvious: Homer and Milton. Since this norm of the grand style points to the relation of form and content, Arnold shows Wordsworth's achievement as "a balance of profound truth of subject with profound truth of execution". Arnold's contention is that "a congruity between conception and expression, which when both are poetical, is the poet's highest result." However, Arnold declines to give a definitive idea of the "grand style".

The judgment of poetry, for Arnold, as he shows in "The Study of Poetry" can be conducted with the help of "infallible touchstones" consisting of "short passages, even single lines". Later critics have shown the weakness of Arnold's argument here because where form and content must, in combination, provide the total experience of good poetry, we cannot seriously consider extracts from a work in isolation. However, Arnold cautions against applying the concept of "touchstones" mechanically: "these few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate." He agrees that a difficulty will be encountered in applying such 'touchstones' to poetry which is different or very dissimilar. In "The Study of Poetry", Arnold gives us eleven 'touchstones' from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. Such touchstones are of not great use in practical criticism but Arnold justifies his recommendations on the grounds that they can be instrumental in "mobilising our sensibility, for focusing our relevant experiences in a sensitive point, for reminding us vividly of what the best is like".

2.5 IDEAS AT WORK

As Prof. Wellek explains, Arnold's critical work is often brought within the label, Kulturphilosophie, on the grounds that it is centred on the "apology for culture, a restatement of the Greek ideal of paideia modified by Christianity; he makes a defence of the study of the humanities against the growing encroachments of scientific and vocational training; he gives a satirical picture of the Anglo-Saxon middle classes: their Philistinism and their religion with its anti-aesthetic bias; he provides a defence of poetry and literature, a defence of the critical spirit and the exercise of criticism; and finally---though this part of his activity is most dated---he advocates an undogmatic religion."

Arnold's influence continues into the work of Irving Babbitt, T.S.Eliot, F.R.Leavis, and Lionel Trilling who also attempted to place the role of criticism in the wider context of social critique. "Culture", from the Arnoldian perspective, is "a study of perfection". Rather than see this in a limited frame, Arnold rounds up the various components that are included in meaning of the term; culture thus "moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good". Since 'culture' encompasses both the intellectual and the moral dimensions as a social force, it operates, for Arnold, in a positive sense in an industrialised society whose only motives centre on profit and mechanical gains. To an extent, culture works like religion, which is constituted by the "voice of the deepest human experience". Both religion and culture aid the cultivation of inwardness. Culture, according to him, "places human perfection in an internal condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality". Arnold famously declares: "Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, is the character of perfection as culture conceives it; and here, too, it coincides with religion".

At times, as Wellek expresses, "We may feel that Arnold loses all perspective when he tries to extend the claims of literature and voices the hope that it will replace religion." But we should remember that Arnold's main contribution comes in the justification of criticism. For Arnold, criticism means "the critical spirit in general, the application of intelligence to any and all subject." Perhaps we should be sensitive to the associations and meanings that Arnold adjoins with the term, criticism.

Arnold gave profound support to what he called "disinterestedness" in criticism. While the normal usage of the term may point to detachment, for Arnold it brought in ideas other than aloofness or escapism. For a critic like him, who was involved in the polemics of his time, 'disinterestedness' caught the range of critical attitudes he upheld - "a denial of immediate political and sectarian ends, a wide horizon, an absence of prejudice, serenity beyond the passions of the moment." What he proposed as the aim of criticism - "the endeavour . . . to see the object as in itself it really is" - would be facilitated through 'disinterestedness' which was based on the instinct to inquire of "the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind."

Arnold sought the free circulation of ideas and intellectual curiosity. He considered the English to be too insular and provincial and looked to an openness towards French and German ideas. Of Arnold's own learning, Prof. Wellek opines that "Arnold's own "curiosity" may have fallen far short of the

ideal of Goethe's world literature (to which he alludes), but one should recognize that Arnold knew his Homer and Sophocles in the original, welcomed Leopardi, Heine, and Tolstoy, and was steeped in the French criticism of his time. (He knew not only Sainte-Beuve and Taine, but also Planche, Nisard, Villemain, Scherer, Vinet, Saint-Marc Girardin, and many others.). But while one should admit that he was no Sainte-Beuve, Dilthey, or Croce (he was, after all, a poet and a busy inspector of schools), he read Greek and Latin, German and French (and some Italian), and knew enough for a critic who does not even pretend to be a professional literary historian or classical philologist." These remarks should awaken us to the demands of both understanding the business of the scholar as well as to bring to us the refreshingly first-hand reading of Arnold!

What kind of theory of criticism did Arnold discuss? He did say that "the great art of criticism is to get oneself out of the way and let humanity decide." Arnold seemed to have favoured interpretation and description in the practice of criticism. For him, Sainte-Beuve stood as a perfect critic: "a critic of measure, not exuberant; of the centre, not provincial; of keen industry and curiosity, with 'Truth' (the word engraved in English on his seal) for his motto; moreover with gay an amiable temper, his manner as good as his matter." Criticism was, in a way, a preparation for creation as it helped to cull information. In his later years, however, Arnold emphasised the judicial function of criticism: the "real estimate" thus is to be preferred over the historical and the personal estimates (in "The Study of Poetry"). The personal estimate is the assessment arising out of the experiences of our personal histories, and therefore purely subjective. What is the fallacy of the historical estimate? This is slightly more complex, as Wellek explains: "It is the overestimate that comes from seeing a work as a stage in the development of literature, especially in the early development of a national poetry." He is critical of the attempt to acquaint oneself with the circumstances of historical relationships that surround a genuine classic because it amounts to "dilettantism" -unless it has the purpose or aim of deeper enjoyment behind it. Today, we may not appreciate the significance of the "real estimate" but Wellek argues the case that, in the first instance, Arnold may have wished to be free of his own historicism which could spell the relativisation of values, and in the second instance, to reject the claims of the antiquarian historians of his time. As we find out from Wellek, Arnold "thinks the Chanson de Roland, medieval romances in general, and Marot overrated, and he protests against the German worship of the Nibelungenlied."

Check Your Progress

1. Consider Arnold's principles of literary evaluation as aspects of his socio-cultural concerns.
2. Explain Arnold's emphasis on "disinterestedness" as a critical concept.
3. Explain Arnold's thesis regarding the various fallacies that entrap critical judgment.

You will find it interesting to know that Arnold himself was imbued with the historical spirit. This was to be seen in his inaugural lecture at Oxford (in 1857), "On the Modern Element in Literature" in which Arnold conceived of sequences of literatures in terms of sequences of nations and ages judged through their political and intellectual achievements and their life and vigour. The literatures, rated according to their 'representativeness' of the age and the nation, were measured on such 'adequacy' of expression. As Wellek explains, "Such an "adequate" literature is then pronounced to be "modern", regardless of chronology." What Wellek has to tell us may be of interest to you -- for instance, In Arnold's scheme English 18th-century literature appears as "a provincial and second-rate literature," in contrast to the French literature of that age, "one of the most powerful and pervasive intellectual agencies that have ever existed," and one that "fulfilled a great mission victoriously." Arnold recognizes the historical importance of English 18th-century literature as a reaction to the poetic exuberance of the Elizabethan Age and as the creator of a sober modern prose style. And, in a letter, he admitted that Pope's poetry was "adequate to Pope's age--that is, it reflected completely the best culture and intelligence of that age." But it "was a poor time after all." . . The English romantic period is similarly considered as lacking in "intellectual atmosphere." English poetry of the first quarter of the century . . ."did not know enough."

Stop to Consider

A biographical viewpoint

A comment by Prof. Wellek should help you to a better understanding of the significance of Arnold's critical ideas. Today, his essays are a staple in our curricula and we often miss out on his best contributions. Partly, this has happened through the mechanical summing up of various editorial commentaries. But Wellek gives us a rare insight into the critic himself through the following paragraph:

"Arnold's stereotyped phrases and formulas are unfortunately the best remembered side of his criticism. He knew it himself and treated his pet phrases

with proper irony. In "A Liverpool Address" (1882) he draws his accepted image as a "nearly worn-out man of letters," "with a frippery of phrases about sweetness and light, seeing things as they really are, knowing the best that has been thought and said in the world, which never had very much solid meaning, and have now quite lost the gloss and charm of novelty." The range and variety of Arnold's criticism belie such a superficial indictment."

2.6 SUMMING UP

By now you have attained some familiarity with the set of issues that Arnold dealt with in the course of his critical writings. As you can see, Arnold's concern was with the business of critique in his surroundings. His work discovers for us how effectively social critique makes its home in literary criticism. No literary theory can evade the deeper problems of the status of literature in society. If at one level, we agree that literature reflects what constitutes the bases of society, at another level it affects the higher planes at which society wishes to see its image. Arnold seems to have been deeply aware of the question of knowledge where literary critique is concerned. This would lie at the heart of his equation of poetry with religion. It is also notable that Arnold disagreed with the claims of bourgeois philosophy which concentrated on utilitarian attitudes. To that extent, the cultural critique that Arnold advances is an attempt to go beyond the purely "literary". At the same time, there is some justice in the observation that Arnold does not engage in practical criticism itself but rather attends to the philosophy of criticism. As others have said, he is indeed a "propagandist" of criticism without the literary repertoire that is necessary to carry forward the actual practice of criticism. However, it is also correct that his stature as a critic is incontestable.

2.7 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

1. M.A.R.Habib: *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Blackwell Publishing, Indian Reprint 2006
3. René Wellek: *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750 - 1950, Vol.4: The Later Nineteenth Century*. Jonathan Cape, London, 1965, 1966, Reprint 1970

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