

T D C Part Three Honours

Romanticism and Classicism

The terms Classic and Romantic, have been creating a great controversy over their exact definition, in English literature. According to some critics like Goethe: Classicism is health, Romanticism is disease.” On the other hand, enthusiastic like young Stendhal, are of the opinion that “all good art is romantic.”

“Without going into the historical background, the true meaning of the word “Romanticism” lies in the durative of the several words: romance, Romanesque, romantic. They all refer ultimately to the vernacular tongues of the people inhabiting southern Europe after the breakdown of the Roman Empire and the decay of the classical Latin. This is why we have today in European universities, departments of romance languages. It also defines a style of architecture prevailing in that time and place. Romanticism refers to simplicity and naturalness, a love of plain feelings and truth to commonplace reality. In other words, there is the rejection of the artificialities that inevitably develop in the urban centres of an advanced civilization.

The term roman was applied to translations from Latin in the middle ages. Then this term was further applied to the various works of the Elizabethan age. In the late seventeenth, and eighteenth century, the term connoted wild extravagant and improbable. The philosophers, Hobbes and Locke were deadly against the romances. They observed that the phenomena of the world could be grasped and explained through reason without the aid of the mysterious or supernatural. In the 18th century literary writings, the term romantic was applied to scenes and ruins of medieval buildings, by Addison and Grey. It is very curious to find that the early 19th century poets, Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge, did not consider themselves romantic. Wordsworth regarded romantic as something undesirable, excessive and extravagant. It was in the later nineteenth century criticism that the term Romantic Revival was applied to the poetry produced between 1798 and 1824, in modern English usage, four different meanings of the term can be noted.”

As opposed to commonplace imaginative, remote from experience’ and everyday life, visionary expressing vague longings away from the ordinary. As opposed to probable: fanciful, fantastic, pertaining to a dreamy fairyland. As opposed to the literal: mystic,

symbolic, and unseen. As opposed to formal: grand, picturesque, passionate, irregularly beautiful.

It has variously been applied: “to drama, which neglected unities and blended tragedy and comedy; to imitations of German plays; to sunset across the river; to ghost haunted ruins of medieval castles; to the Nature poetry of Wordsworth, which endeavoured to give the charm of the unusual to common every day things; to the poetry of Coleridge which endeavoured to present the supernatural in a usual and common aspect; to the eastern tales of Southey; to the historical novels of Scott; the fiercely passionate and rebellious poetry of Byron; to the idealism of Shelley and to the Hellenism of Keats. To Victor Hugo “Melancholy is the distinguishing mark of romantic art. Yet it is absent from the poetry of Wordsworth.”

However, critics have analysed romanticism, focused upon its inner depths, from individual standpoints. A classification of the different approaches to romanticism will be illuminating here. Peter, Watts Dutton and others would insist upon an element of wonder and strangeness being its essence. Another group of Critics Hereford for example would look upon romanticism as “an extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility.” A third group of critics, Grierson for example, would represent romanticism as a spirit of revolt. Classicism, in their opinion is the intellectual counterpart of political tyranny, and romanticism, of liberation. Yet another group would view classicism as denoting something solid, permanent built upon sound common sense, and romanticism as something, “disheveled, ethereal, misty and changeful. Again another opinion insists that romanticism is allied to medievalism which is a collective name for so many things.

Whatever way the definitions have been dealt with, do not reach any finality. It is, therefore, necessary that we select and critically examine the most famous descriptions of romanticism. They are discussed below:

While criticizing Peter’s definition “Addition of strangeness to beauty,” it may be pointed out that it gives no positive principle by which to differentiate the romantic from the classic.

Every poet is keen to seek beauty and makes efforts to convey his vision of beauty in a manner, which is highly individual, although it may not be original. Pope, although he was a classic, added strangeness to beauty of heroic couplet. “The finish and polish the conciseness and precision that Pope added to that measure;” was not only strange but new. And this is a characteristic of all great art. All great works of art stand out by virtue of the strangeness in

their beauty Peter is himself conscious of it and admits that all great art was Romantic in its day.

Abercrombie observes in romanticism, a withdrawal from the outer experience for concentration on inner experience and we may regard this as another means of escape from limitations of actual life. He feels that romanticism is an element of art, while classicism is not an element of art, but a mode of combining elements in a just proportion. He defines classicism as health of art. There is no element of classicism as such. Romanticism is one of those elements, just as realism is also an element. The difference is between the predominance of a single element in romantic poets and mutually Concorde proportion of several in classical literature. The inner experience becomes for the romanticist the one genuine reality, according to Abercrombie. Shelley was one great example of this attitude. We may criticize the view of L. Abercrombie. To identify Romanticism with that limited world of inner experience would be to restrict romanticism, either within that limited world the mind alone reacts in entire oblivion or disregard of the outer world; or it would be exaggerating the limits of that world till it became coeval with all that Romanticist might imply. At any rate, it would effectively exclude the poetry of Scott and might be made to include the Imaginary Conversations of Landor. Thus while romanticism does imply and involve a rejection of the outer world of experience, the withdraw or escape from it is effected variously by the different poets. His theory pertaining to inner experience in romanticism does not hold too much water. In the work of great romantic, there is as much of fusion between the inner experiences and outer as in the work of great artist. Shelly's Ode to West Wind and Cloud, Keats Ode to Nightingale and Ode to Gracian Urn attain this fusion superbly. If we accept withdraw from outer experience to concentrate upon inner experience as the distinguishing characteristics of Romantic art, we shall have to exclude some of the remarkable work from the romantic category. For example, La Belle Dame Sans Marci, The Eve of St. Agnes, Lodania and the Ancient Mariner are the unique examples of Romantic art of which the definition of L. Aberrombe does not apply. But they are the outstanding works of romantic art. Moreover, it must be taken into consideration that the classical artists alike follow inner experience. Hereford is of the opinion that inner experience. Hereford is of the opinion that inner experience can be embodied in Classical art. Thus, L. Abercrombie's definition does not enable us to differentiate the classic from the romantic.

T.S. Eliot does differentiate Romantic from the Classic. He calls romanticism as fragmentary, immature and chaotic. If we hold his view correct, then we will have to reassesses the status

of Adonais, The Cloud, the West Wind, Ode to Autumn, Ode to Nightingale, Ode to Grecian Urn and the Shylark are fragmentary and chaotic, whereas they are very mature masterpieces of English literature. The maturity of literature is the reflection of English literature. The maturity of literature is the reflection of the society in which it is produced; an individual author notably Shakespeare and Virgil can do much to develop his language; but he cannot bring that language to maturity unless the work of his predecessors has prepared it for final touch.

Amongst the best fruits of the earliest phase of the romantic spirit were stories of love and chivalry, which took shape in Provence. After this, there was, in Elizabethan era, in England, another explosion of the romantic spirit in poetry, drama and other forms of, literature. But when its popularity led to exaggeration and cheap imitation by meaner spirits, Ben Jonson, the famous dramatist and critic, sought to curb its excesses by appealing to the rule and restraint of classical literature.

In the famous literary, and artistic revolution, in the earlier part of the 19th Century, Known as "The Romantic Revival, the Romantic spirit reached its high water-mark. In prose and poetry, the creative artists sought to bring back the atmosphere of the romances of medieval times its weirdness and magic and its keen longing for a balcony seat above time and space.

The English poetry of the war, post-war and between two war periods is intensely romantic. Romantic expression has changed, but romantic feelings stir stubbornly at the centre of creative impulses. Among the poets of the post-war generation, Eliot alone presents some difficulty. His apparently unromantic gesture, his dry matter of fact manner of looking at things, the current of satire and irony that water course of his poetry would naturally lead and unsuspecting critic into thinking that he is an unromantic reaction against the decadent romanticism of Georgian poetry. But the post-war period was one of stark disillusionment and tragic in decision. Preparedness for breakdown of a poetic tradition as, this age witnessed, had begun, the war only hastening its consummation. Of this period Eliot was typical poet, with his heritage of anarchy fall upon his shoulders and he exposed the modern Waste Land peopled by its hollow men in its nakedness. A chronicler of his sterile and decadent life in verse, Eliot remains, not an unromantic poet, but a dissatisfied romantic, a superb of may be called negative romanticism. It is interesting to note how the poet Spender describes the beauty of the machine with romantic favour:

What nudity as beautiful at this

Obedient monster purring at its toil

Those naked muscles dropping oil

And the soured fingered rods that never miss.

Similarly in describing an aeroplane, Spender's imagination gets inspired with anew conception of beauty:

More beautiful and soft than any moth

With burring furred antennae feeling its huge path

Through dusk, the air-line with shut-off engines

Glides over suburbs and the sleeves at trailing tall

To point the wind, Gently, broadly, she falls

Scarcely disturbing the chartered currents of air

Day Lewis and Spender dream of the future. The post-war age, with its disintegration and social evils, created a deep unrest in the minds of the above poets, but the impact of socialist ideas saved them from sinking into pure individualism. What we find in these poets is an attempt at a social synthesis, what has already been termed a stage in the socialization of personal values, in their passion for a reformed world, they utter, with the zeal and fervour of Shelley, prophetic words about to heal their world. They do not escape into the ivory Tower. In short, they synthesise themselves with the world, the present with the future when Day Lewis speaks of the regenerated world, his voice is like Shelley's asking West Wind to scatter his words among mankind:

Make us a wind

To shake the world out of this sleep sickness

Where flesh has dwindled and brightness waned.

Make us the wind

From new world that springs and gathers force

Cleaning the air, cleaning the wound.

From the above sketch, it will be clear how, in each phase or trend of Romanticism, there were side by side with the admirers of the new trend, grey heads, among the critics, who, chiefly, on the authority of classicism would shake their heads at the new romantic tendency and exclaim, "Tis Art's decline, my son" In the field of literary criticism, for instance, it led to some new and important discoveries.

Romanticism lies, therefore; in imaginative into the unplumbed depths of the soul, in the almost idealistic disregard for external reality as much as concentration on the inner reality of the mind. It lies in the new imaginative mapping up and charting of the modern age of mechanisms.

In modern poetry, we witness both. Romanticism has meant a widening of artistic sympathy, "at countless points the universe of sense and thought acquired a new potency of response and appeal to man, and a new capacity of ministering to and mingling with the richest and in tensest life." All these poets, so different in genius, temperament, and tendency were limited in their aim, which was the emancipation of the world and of the mind and of the vehicle of poetry from the bondage of the fact, of opinion, formality, and tradition; and when fact, opinion, formality, and tradition goes out, imagination comes in.