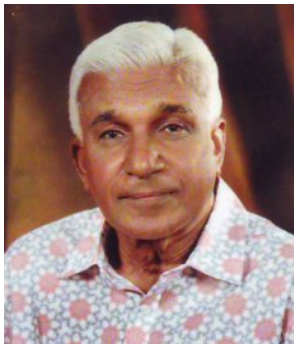


Poetry of the romantics: recollections

Written by By K.S.Sivakumaran

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Perhaps students just introduced to the Romantic Poets of England would like to know something about Romanticism and the like which might help them to understand the kind of poetry in a better way. This article gives you the essential points. Romanticism was a term used in Germany and France at the end of the 18th and beginning of 19th century to classify a... new movement in literature, especially in poetry. The Romantic Age in English Literature is supposed to be the work of number of writers between 1790 and 1830, especially the six poets --- William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats.

The poets

We must first take note of the fact that there is no strict classification of the Romantic Age. We must next see what is important and interesting in the Romantic Age with particular reference to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, the poets we have to study.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Harold Bloom has described that English Romanticism saw itself as a renaissance of the English Poetry. This enthusiasm is shared by C M Bowra, when he says: a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the 18th century poets is the special importance given to the imagination. For the Romantics imagination is fundamental because, because they thin that without it poetry is impossible. In fact if we analyze the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats we find that they were splendidly imaginative. This was part of the belief in the individual self which sought expression or release through the imagination.

For the Romantics imagination is fundamental because, because they think that without it poetry is impossible. This was part of the belief in the individual self which sought expression or release through the imagination. This does not mean that they were opposed to Rationalism. The thought element tends to go out of hand. The analytical faculty of 'murder to dissect' is frowned upon.

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The irrational element is given an important place. They combined even psychology, dram and horror in their poetry. This is evident especially in poets like Shelley.

Spiritual satisfaction

They gave into feelings and surrendered to their enthusiasm. For instance the moral and spiritual satisfaction was the experience what Wordsworth saw in his "Daffodils". It was individualistic to Wordsworth. They were not ashamed of passion. They could explore and at worst it could lose balance. That is to say as T S Eliot would call it "the dissociation of sensibility"

The Romantics were capable of entering a child's consciousness as we find in Blake's poem. But in the previous Augustan Age this was not allowed. In this sense the Romantics expressed what had been denied to earlier poets. We must remember the fact that the Romantics can be considered not materialistic in both negative and positive sense. They reacted consciously against the Augustans in the same way the "moderns" reacted against the Victorians. This was a positive element.

The negative element is that they felt that the nature was destroyed with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. They had special emphatic interest in Nature, because they saw the physical and social dislocations of life as narrated by Wordsworth in "Michel". One could see the poet's moral and spiritual values implicitly stated in the poem. But the Romantics did not realize then that some of their cherished values were subject to change. In this sense the Romantics were very idealistic and therefore they failed to see the realities.

The Romantics loved and roamed nature and gained a personal experience. It was also part of a reaction to the general and social situation of the time. The Industrial and Agrarian revolutions led to the dislocation of natural environment. Therefore the reaction to the Age is an important factor.

Nature admiration

But we must remember the fact that they loved Nature, but not or its own sake. "In Nature all the Romantics found their initial inspiration. It was not everything to them, but they would have been nothing without it, for through it they found those exalting moments when they passed from sight to vision and pierced as they thought to the secrets of the universe" says C M Bowra

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in his "Romantic Imagination" We can see that this statement is true in respect of Wordsworth in his sympathies.

It is important to remember that each tended to express the feelings of man in solitude as opposed to man in society. But Blake is an exception. (His "London" is superb indictment on society) and he also responded vividly to natural environment. We also note that though Shelley had strong political and social connections, he was bent more on the Romantic spirit, as it were. All these poets were profoundly affected by the French Revolution but the Napoleonic wars caused Blake to withdraw his sympathy. Wordsworth became conservative. As for Shelley he was always an 'Aristocratic revolutionary', while Keats was non-political but radical.

The general characteristics of the Romantic poets may be summed up as follows:

They had a deep interest in the world of Nature in its relation to life. As if frightened by the changes taking place around them like the Industrial Revolution, they turned to the rustic world and its people. They valued their own personal experiences to a very high degree.

They did not depend on legend or historical events for the subject matter of their poetry. Except Blake they placed the 'source of poetic inspiration' in the minds of the poet without any reference to society and its times. Due to exigencies of space allotted to me, let's stop here and look forward to next week for further discussion on Romantic Poets.

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