

A Critical Estimation of Wordsworth's Concept of Poet and Poetry

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ABSTRACT:

William Wordsworth, one of the greatest poets of nature, is a distinguished pioneer in the field of Romantic criticism. His main purpose in writing the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* was the creation of a new poetic taste by which his own poems were to be judged. Wordsworth's theory of poetry was by and large a reaction or revolt against the established poetic rules of the eighteenth century. He felt that man is a fit subject for poetic composition and if he (the poet) did not leave a proud record of creative work dealing with human life then he was not worthy to be ranked among the first rate poets. Wordsworth called his poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* 'experiments' as he was presenting a new kind of material to the public. The contents of the historic "Preface" originated from the mutual discussion of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth's main object in writing poems has been to choose incidents and situation from common life and to describe them in a selection of language really used by them (rustics). For Wordsworth, it is in the rustic life the fundamental passion of heart develops smoothly and grows harmoniously.

Keywords: Romantic criticism, Preface, Lyrical Ballads, Theory of Poetry, Poetic Rules, Eighteenth Century, Rustics.

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Shelley compared the poet with his skylark. To Henry Vaughan, the poet was like an angel. For Shakespeare, he (the poet) was a lunatic, a lover but full of compact imagination. But Wordsworth's does not agree with the traditional view of the poet. To him the poet is neither a lunatic nor a lover, nor is he an uncommon man but the one who believes in the dignity of common life; the one who sings for men in the language really used by them. He transmits his own feelings, emotions and passions through poetry so as, to reach them and to be enjoyed by them. It is pertinent to mention here Wordsworth was affected by the French Revolution. He believed in the dictum that 'man is equal to man.' According to Wordsworth, the difference between the common man and man of genius, i.e., the poet, is one of degree: the poet possesses not merely more lively but more affectionate sensibility than the common man does. Commenting on the qualifications of poet, he writes:

He is a man speaking to men; a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and more tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.

The poet in Wordsworthian terms is essentially a man speaking to men. He is a person who writes not for his own pleasure but primarily to communicate his own thoughts and emotions to his readers. Secondly, he is a man who has more lively sensibility, that is to say, he reacts more strongly to external impressions. Thirdly, he has a more comprehensive soul and greater knowledge of human nature. The distinguishing attributes of a poet as put forth by Wordsworth in the preface are as under:

- a. The poet is a man speaking to men. He has an uncommon sensibility that distinguishes him from the common man. He observes, hears and feels more than there is to observe, hear and feel.
- b. He has a greater power of imagination and so can feel or react emotionally to events and incidents which he has not directly experienced.
- c. He has a greater knowledge of human life.
- d. He has a more comprehensive soul. It means that the poet shares the emotional experiences of others, can identify himself emotionally with others, and can express feelings and emotions of others.
- e. He has a greater zest for life than an ordinary man.
- f. The poet should write poetry in the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society. The language of the rustic is capable of being poetic because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived.

Wordsworth was primarily a poet. Like many great poets, he also formulated his own theory of poetry in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, when he was at the height of his poetic power. He regarded the vocation of poetry as very high. He calls poetry "the most philosophical of all writings," "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," "the image of man and nature." In the "Preface" he writes that the function of poetry is, "to produce excitement in co-existence with an over balance of pleasure." Here, he differs from John Dryden, Pope and Johnson who considered that the true aim of poetry was both "instruct and delight." Wordsworth's pleasure is not aesthetic one but contains a moral conception of pleasure. According to Wordsworth, the

pleasure provided by poetry is through meter, rhyme and such external aids which aim at softening the painful emotions.

Poetry to Wordsworth is the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and “it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility.” What is meant by spontaneity is that poetry proceeds from the internal feelings of a poet. It is a matter of mood, temperament and feelings and when the poet has these three things then the poetry flows naturally. We cannot ask a poet, says Wordsworth, to write a poem at our will, poetry cannot be produced to order but it must flow out spontaneously, voluntarily and willingly from the soul of the poet.

Wordsworth regards poetry as a superior branch to science. He asserts that the truths of science are particular and individual, while poetic truth is universal and general and can be shared by all. The scientist studies through the intellect and the knowledge he acquires is superficial; the poet goes down to the soul of things. The truths which he realizes are colored by his imagination and emotion and hence Wordsworth calls poetry the “finer spirit of all knowledge.” He further says, the appeal of the scientist is exclusively to the intellect; that of the poet is to the heart and soul of his readers.

Nevertheless, Wordsworth is not considered among the best English critics, yet his criticism has a value and importance of its own. His critical theory is a revolution in matter of selection of subject for the purpose of poetry. The poetic diction was gaudy and inane in the eighteenth century against which Wordsworth raised his voice in the “Preface.” The eighteenth century poets had used figures, similes and metaphors unnecessarily. Wordsworth felt that such language tended to separate poetry from human life whereas poetry was in reality closely connected with human nature. He calls that kind of language (eighteenth century) “vague, glossy and unfeeling.” Wordsworth’s “Preface” is the manifesto of the Romantic Movement. It contains that went to make the new movement a force in English literature.

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