

Dr Shashi Sharma

M.A. Ind Sem

Romantic Lit Paper Six

William Wordsworth

The Lyrical Ballads

(Rajasthan M. A., 1982 & 1986)

or

Q. 209. "Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion," and "Poetry has its origin in emotions recollected in tranquillity." Reconcile the two statements.

Ans. Defining poetry Wordsworth says in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): "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." Thus to Wordsworth poetry is a matter of feeling, mood and temperament. When the mood is on him it flows naturally, and without labour.

There are at least four stages through which an experience has to pass before successful composition becomes possible. First of all, there is the observation or perception of some object, character or incident which sets up powerful emotions in the mind of the poet. Secondly, there is recollection or contemplation of that emotion in tranquillity. An interval of time, it may be quite long, say ten years, must lapse, during which the first experience sinks deep into the poet's consciousness and becomes a part and parcel of his being. For the filtering or selective process, time and solitude are essential. Thirdly, the integration of memory by the poet sets us, or revives, the emotion in "the mind itself." It is very much like the first emotion, but is purged of all superfluities and constitutes a 'state of enjoyment'. The fourth is that of composition.

Herbert Read has admirably summed up Wordsworth's theory of poetry and poetic composition in the following words: "Good poetry is never an immediate re-action to the provoking cause; that our sensations must be allowed time to sink back into the common fund of our experience, there to find their level and due proportion. That level is found for them by the mind in the act of contemplation, and then in the process of contemplation the sensations revive and out of the union of the contemplating mind and the receiving

of sensibility, rises that unique mood of expression which we call poetry."

However, by spontaneity in poetry Wordsworth did not imply a complete rejection of workmanship, or artlessness. He himself composed his poems with the greatest care. The function of poetry, according to Wordsworth, was to delight. Even when the subject is painful in itself, it must be so treated that it would result in an "overplus of pleasure." Poetry is something felt in and felt along the blood. The proper subjects of poetry are incidents, situations and characters taken from low and rustic life. In their condition of life the elementary passions and emotions find a clearer and freer expression, for they are not repressed or inhibited by conventions, as is the case with more sophisticated people. They can be observed more clearly and expressed more accurately. The poet must deal with such simple subjects but so as to throw over them, "A certain colouring of imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way." Poetry for Wordsworth was a composition in a language spoken by rustic, common people, free from artificial poetic diction of the 18th century. Furthermore, poetry is the pursuit of truth—of man's knowledge of himself and the world around him. Finally, poetry is a great force for good.

It should also be noted here though 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' are the very opposite of each other—the one coming on a sudden, the other deliberately recalled to memory—Wordsworth makes no difference between the two and endeavours to explain the one by the other. In the reconciliation of the two the emotion originally aroused by the sight was re-created in contemplation as nearly as possible till it overpowered the mind completely, driving contemplation thence. So this is how poetry originates in emotion recollected in tranquillity and is therefore, ultimately the product of the original free flow of that emotion. Had no emotion been aroused of itself in the beginning, there would have been no recollection of it in tranquillity and so no expression of it in poetry. The first stage in the poetic process is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', the next their recollection in tranquillity, and the last their expression in poetry.

POINTS TO REMEMBER