

Lecture 09

Romanticism: The Cult of the Poet

Intertwining of the Human and the Natural

Hello and welcome back to another lecture on Literary Theory. We will continue our discussion on Romanticism and we will see how a new relationship between man and nature formed the basis of the Romantic world view in general and Romantic theory of art in particular. But we will enter into this topic by picking up the thread of discussion from where we had left it in our previous lecture. In that lecture we had talked about how the human image that is to be found at the heart of the Romantic worldview is not the mature adult man of the bourgeois public sphere of the earlier generation but rather oppressed, disenfranchised and marginalized figures residing at the edges of the class-based patriarchal society.

We have also discussed how, in the pioneering romantic poetry of William Wordsworth, we find these figures from the social margins located amidst nature. Indeed, we find their distinct human existence almost blurring and disappearing against their natural backdrop so much so that they become one with nature. This we have discussed with reference to the poems “The Female Vagrant” and “Resolution and Independence” but if we are looking at the whole body of Wordsworth’s poetry we can easily go on adding other such instances like for example the figure of the solitary reaper cutting and binding grains while her melancholy strain overflows the vale profound. Or for example “The Idiot Boy” whose mother goes out in search of him and finds him standing:

near the waterfall,
Which thunders down with headlong force,
Beneath the moon, yet shining fair,
As careless as if nothing were,

However, it is not only in Wordsworth's poetry that we see such intertwining of the human and the nature. The motif of such figures intertwined with their natural surrounding occurs again and again in the poetry of all of the major romantics. And though their status as marginalized individuals might not always be as apparent as they usually are in the poetry of Wordsworth, they are always depicted as lonely figures far removed from the world of the adult male bourgeois engaged in conversations with his peers within the public sphere. Consider for instance the poem "Frost at Midnight" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge who was another pioneer of the British Romantic movement and who co-authored along with Wordsworth the seminal book of verses titled *Lyrical Ballads*. In this poem we see Coleridge imagining a future for his baby son where he will

[...] wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds

If we move beyond these lonely figures wandering and laboring amidst nature that we encounter in Wordsworth and Coleridge, and we come to the next generation of Romantic poets like John Keats or P.B. Shelly, we find even more interesting instances of the intertwining of the human

and the natural. For instance, in Keats we find the haunting image of Autumnal season personified as a lonely reaper

on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:

In here the two concepts of nature and man so completely dissolves into one another that the reader is left with an image that is best described as nature made human made nature again. Such an intense human-nature relation where the two terms almost gets fused into one is also witnessed in that other great romantic poet of the second generation, Shelley. In his “Ode to the West Wind” we see the poet invoking zephyr or the westerly wind to

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
[...] Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Mimesis and Art

As I have said before, it is this fused image of nature and human that formed the basis of a radical new literary theory in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To understand the way in which it departed from the neoclassical theories of literature prevalent during the most of the eighteenth century let us revisit the idea of mimesis which is at the heart of the classical literary theories. First let us go back to the theory of mimesis proposed by Plato. As you will know from our previous lectures, Plato's theory of mimesis was based on a notion of the world of Ideas. According to Plato, this supra-material world of Ideas constitutes the original non-substantial forms of every created thing. The craftsman, like a furniture maker for instance, copies that

original form and gives it a material shape in the form of a bed or a chair, or an almirah, etc. Now in Plato's view this job of the craftsman involves a process of mimesis or imitation in which the material bed for instance is produced as a pale and partial copy of the non-substantial original form as it exists in the world of Ideas. In this scheme of things, the artist or the poet is also an imitator who copies from the world of objects that he finds around him. This means that for Plato, the work of an artist or a poet is at least doubly removed from the Ideas which represent the true reality of the world of forms.

As we have discussed in the past, these processes of successive mimesis or imitation is considered by Plato as a movement from truth to falsehood. The furniture builder can only make a poor and partial copy of the original non-substantial form because he is constrained by the limitations of the matter. The poet or the artist is further constrained in his imitation of the world of objects by the limitations of his sense perceptions. A straight stick that is immersed in water will appear to the eyes as bent and this according to Plato will then falsify the representation of the stick in the work of the artist or the poet who only mirrors what they find in front of them. So in other words Plato's theory presents art and poetry as a kind of faulty mirroring of the truth.

I would like to draw your attention to the role of the artist or the poet that is being assumed here. In Plato's scheme of things, the best artist or the best poet is a person who does not exist. Let me elaborate on this. If art or literature is to be a mirroring activity, then more transparent the mirror the better. Any form of intervention or subjective input that the artist or the poet brings into play is potentially dangerous because it tampers with the transparency of the mirroring process. Thus all artistic interventions are regarded within the Platonic scheme of things as interventions which lead from truth to falsehood. Thus the moment the poet or the artist asserts his identity by making visible his subjective position within his work of art, he gets exposed as a liar and a

fraudster who leads the audience away from the truth. It is this understanding of the poet as liar which is behind Plato's famous injunction to ban poets from his ideal republic.

Mimesis and the Poet

Now this Platonic theory of mimesis remained one of the mainstays of literary criticism in the Western world right from the Renaissance, when the spirit of classicism was rediscovered, down to the eighteenth century, when the wave of neoclassicism swept through much of the European literary scene. M.H Abrams in his important study on Romantic theory and critical tradition titled, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, traces how the Platonic metaphor of art and literature as mirrors of truth and the ideal reality is repeatedly used by theorists between sixteenth and eighteenth century. But during this period, when art in general and poetry in particular was being conceptualized as a mirroring activity, an attempt was made to also raise the status of the poet from being identified merely as a liar or a fraudster. But before we come to how Plato's idea of art and literature as mimesis was modified between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, we need to note that Plato's denigration of the poet was already challenged by his disciple Aristotle.

If you remember our discussions of Aristotle's *Poetics* you will know that Aristotle presented the poet as a craftsman. So just like furniture maker makes a bed by using wood, chisel, and saw, etc. a poet also makes poetry by using rhythm, melody, words, etc. as his tools. So Aristotle does not really go out of the Platonic frame of mimetic theory but tweaks it in important ways so that the poet no longer remains doubly removed from the truth of the world of ideals but at least enjoys the same status as any craftsman who is trying to represent an ideal truth through their work.

The ways in which literary theorists working with Plato's concept of mimesis between the sixteenth and eighteenth century tried to rescue the poet from the ignominy of being branded a liar was, however, slightly different. They did it primarily by revisiting the notion of ideal truth and its reflection in the natural world around us. One important argument which emerged during this period, and indeed emerged following the Platonic scheme of things, was that the natural world if perceived through individual instances is not a perfect reflection of the ideal or the truth. Thus for instance in the enormous variety of humans, plants and animals that we see around us, it is impossible to find one single instance of perfection. It is the poet, or the painter or the sculptor who can rectify the shortcomings of the real world around us and create a world of perfection. This is to say that Michelangelo's David is closer to the truth of the ideal man than any of the individual human beings who live on this earth. So for the English neoclassical literary theorists, like Dr. Samuel Johnson for instance, the poet or the artist even while engaging with the natural world must do it selectively so that he can create an ideal world bereft of the several imperfections that are present in nature:

It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation.

So, by the eighteenth century the role poet was already elevated from the marginalized position of being a liar to the exalted position of being a mediator between the ultimate truth and reality and the human conception of that truth.

Plotinus

In studying the movement of literary theory towards the romantic period of late eighteenth early nineteenth century, we also need to take note of the influence of another major figure, Plotinus.

Plotinus was a third century Greek speaking philosopher who is widely known for modifying the Platonic relations between Ideas, Nature and the Poet in an important way. He argued that the poet was closer to the real of the Ideas, which was also interpreted as the realm of God, than the natural world. In Plotinus' words, "We must recognize that they [poets/artists] give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives".

Observe how in this new theoretical orientation that Plotinus introduces, the artist or the poet gradually moves from the role of a mere imitator to that of the creator. The movement is not quite complete in Plotinus and the notion of the artist as the creator will only reach its peak with the Romantics. But here the artist is raised almost to the level of God himself. This is because Plotinus argues that the poet or the artist can directly represent the non-substantial "Ideal forms" because even more than nature they are reflected upon his mind. So it is not the nature which is perceived as the reflection of the unsubstantial and divine ideas but rather it is the other way round. Nature for Plotinus represents imperfect representations of the Ideas. The artists mind is the site where the non-substantial Ideas are far more perfectly reflected. Which is why, the artist or the poet can, at best, only selectively borrow from nature, and borrow only those components, which will help him to bring out the true representation of the Ideas lodged in his mind.

So now that we know how the Platonic theory of art as imitation evolved till the eighteenth century, let us see how the Romantic theorists built on them to create a new concept of art and artist.

Romantic theory of Mind

The first important point to be noted about the Romantic literary theory is how it distances poetry or art in general from the notion of imitation. The school of thoughts initiated by Plotinus had

already established the primacy of the poet's mind in the artistic process, and the romantic theorists retained this notion of primacy. But they interpreted the poet's mind slightly differently from Plotinus. For Plotinus the poet was not an imitator of nature but was an imitator nonetheless. Rather than copying nature he copied the Ideas directly as they were reflected in his mind. On the other hand, for the Romantics, the poet's mind was not a storehouse of readymade ideal forms to be truthfully imitated in their artistic expressions. Rather the poet's mind was a site of vibrant creativity where forms and ideas generated from within. It was a space of vital energy which in the English Romantic poetry gets repeatedly identified through the metaphor of a roaring and bubbling water body that is spontaneously overflowing. The most famous depiction of this image of a roaring and bubbling water body that overflows on to the surrounding is perhaps to be found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" where he talks of a "romantic chasm" from which:

with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
[...]
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

The use of such metaphors like river or an overflowing fountain were frequently used in Romantic poetry to depict the creative mind, and here I am reminded of another very powerful

instance of the use of such metaphor which occurs in the famous 'Mount Snowdon' section in Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. But the new theory of the poetic mind which these poetic metaphors represented was nowhere more thoroughly elaborated than in Coleridge's 1817 prose work *Biographia Literaria*. But before we turn to *Biographia Literaria* I just want you to note how, with Romanticism, we are again brought back to the notion of the poet and his genius mind capable of creating artistic sublimity that was championed by Pseudo Longinus. Just like Longinus believed that the ability of the poet's mind to conceive great and noble thoughts out of its own depths was the key ingredient of producing good poetry, the Romantics too believed that the recesses of the poet's mind were the haloed and mystical repositories of artistic creativity.

Fancy and Imagination

For the Romantics the key element which informs the haloed and mystical site of the poet's mind is imagination. But then what is imagination? Coleridge answers this question in his *Biographia Literaria* by drawing a distinction between fancy and imagination. Now throughout our life our minds are impacted almost constantly by various visual images in a stream of succession. When we recall these images in the same order of succession as we experienced them, it is referred to by Coleridge as memory.

Now Coleridge speaks of a faculty of mind which often breaks down these images into fragments and then juxtaposes these fragments into fantastical new orders which have no exact relationship with the images as they were experienced by us. This juxtaposition is what we would usually call the work of imagination in our mundane language, but Coleridge makes a distinction. He calls this ability of the mind "fancy":

The Fancy 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 phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice.

He contrasts this faculty of the mind which he calls fancy with another more potent faculty that characterizes the poet's mind which he calls imagination. Imagination, unlike fancy, does not simply juxtapose fragmented images of the memory. Rather, it is a vital creative force that is organic to the mind. It does assimilate the images that are impressed upon the mind from outside but then it synthesizes them with its own organic structures that grows and overflows out of its own impetus. I hope now the connection between imagination and the metaphor of a romantic chasm seething and roaring with its own energy that Coleridge uses in "Kubla Khan" is somewhat clearer.

Now Coleridge further divided up imagination into two segments: the primary imagination and the secondary imagination. The primary imagination is somewhat akin to the concept of poetic genius. It is the inherent vitality that gives the mind of the poet its creative force. Secondary imagination is an echo of this primary imagination. It is the conscious attempt to exercise this imagination to assimilate and fuse elements imbibed from the outside into an organic whole. In Coleridge's own words:

The secondary 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.

Now the thing to note here is that within this theory of imagination, art or poetry can neither be conceptualized as a mirroring process nor even as a process akin to craftsmanship. Rather art is to be conceptualized as a natural process because the imagination according to Coleridge works in the same way and with the same vital energy as a seed organically grows up into a plant while assimilating external influences like sunlight and water. This brings us to a very important point. For the Romantics, nature and the poetic mind are symbiotically connected. Nature revives the faculty of imagination even as imagination assimilates from nature and grows. It is for this reason that we find Romantic poets repeatedly situating themselves within nature to connect to their internal fonts of creative energy. It is also for this reason that all the key personages in the romantic poetry whom we have so far encountered, like the female vagrant or the idiot boy or Coleridge's young child, are situated amidst nature so much so that they become one with it, thereby fusing the human and the natural.

With this we end our discussion of Romanticism. In our next lecture we will move forward to the twentieth century to study New Criticism. Thank you.