

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 09
Literature and Romanticism (II)

Hello and welcome, back to another lecture in these series 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 worldview in general and romantic theory of art in particular. But, we will enter into this topic by picking up the thread from where we had left it in a previous lecture.

If you remember we had talked about in our previous lecture 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; which was the ideal image of man for the earlier generation of writers and intellectuals. But rather in romanticism we find oppressed, disenfranchised and marginalized figures residing at the edges of the class based patriarchal society and these are the people who are foregrounded by the romantics.

We have also discussed in a previous lecture 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 were 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 greens while her melancholy strain overflows the veil profound or for example, the idiot boy whose mother goes out in search of him and finds him standing in the lines of the poem.

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

(The Idiot Boy, William Wordsworth)

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 natural. The motive of such figures intertwine with their natural surrounding occur again and again in the poetry of all of the major romantics really 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 almost without an exception 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 incidentally another pioneer of the British Romantic Movement and who co-authored with Wordsworth the seminal book of versus titled lyrical balance.

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

(“Frost at Midnight”, Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

In this poem Frost at Midnight, 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 rendering and laboring emits nature that we encounter in Wordsworth and Coleridge.

And, we come to the next generation of romantic poets like John Keats for instance or PB Shelley 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 the autumnal season personified as a lonely reaper.

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

(“To Autumn”, John Keats)

On a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep, Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook Spares the next swath and all it is twined flowers. In here the two concepts of nature and man so completely dissolve into one another that the reader is left with an image that is perhaps best described as nature made human made nature again.

Such an intense human nature relation were the two terms almost fused into one another is also witnessed in that other great romantic poet of the second generation Shelley and if we read his Ode to the West Wind we see that the poet invokes the westerly wind too and I quote from the poem.

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

(“Ode to the West Wind”, P. B. Shelley)

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

Now, 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 the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To understand the ways in which this new theory departed from the new classical theories of literature prevalent during the most of further eighteenth century let us briefly revisit the idea of mimesis which is at the heart of the classical literary theories and therefore, also at the heart of the neoclassical revival.

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 super 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, in the form of a chair and almirah and so on and so forth.

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 idea, 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 matter. The poet of the artist is further constrained when 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 he finds in front of him.

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 this if art or literature is to be considered as a mirroring activity, then the more transparent the mirror is the better. Any form of intervention or subjective input that the artist or the poet brings into play is considered as potentially dangerous because it then tempers 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 fraud stirrer who leads the audience away from the truth. It is this understanding of the poet as a liar, which is behind Plato's famous injunction that poets should be banned from the ideal republic.

Now, this Platonic theory of mimesis remain 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.

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M. H. Abrams
(1912 - 2015)



Source: The Telegraph

M. H. Abrams in his important study on a romantic theory and critical tradition titled *The Mirror and the Lamp* traces how the platonic metaphor of art and literature as mirrors of the 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 also made to 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 Platos denigration of the poet was already challenged by his disciple Aristotle.

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

The ways in which literary theorists working with Plato and with his 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 to what Aristotle was arguing. 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. That is when since 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 a poet or the painter or the sculptor who can rectify the shortcomings of the real world around us and create a world of perfection. So, this was the idea that we find coming to the foreground between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century and if you want to understand this idea just think about Michelangelo's David for instance is closer to the truth according to this argument 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 Doctor Johnson for instance Doctor Samuel Johnson 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.

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“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.”

(Dr. Samuel Johnson)

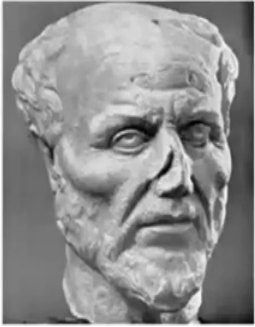
Let me quote from doctor Johnson. It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation. So, by the eighteenth century the role of the poet was already being elevated from the marginalized position of being just a liar to the exerted position of being a mediator between the ultimate truth and reality of the world of ideas and the human conception of that truth. So, the poet was a one who really selected from the nature around him. The things which were most perfect and which could then be used to represent the true ideal form the truth.

Now, 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, whose name was Plotinus.

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Plotinus
(204 CE - 270 CE)

“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”.



Source: Wikipedia

Plotinus was a third century Greek philosopher, Greek speaking philosopher rather actually he was born in modern day Egypt and Plotinus is widely known for modifying the platonic relation between ideas, the world of ideas nature and the poet and he did it in a very important way which had widespread implications.

Plotinus argued that the poet was closer to the realm of the ideas which was also interpreted as a realm of gods than the natural world. In Plotinus's word we must recognize that they, poets or artists, give no bare reproduction of the things seen but go back to the ideas from which nature itself derives. Now, 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 being the creator the movement is not quite complete in Plotinus and the notion of the artist as a 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 upon the mind of the poets. So, it is not the nature which is perceived as a reflection of the unsubstantial and divine ideas, but rather it is the other way around nature for Plotinus represents imperfect representations of the idea.

The artists mind is on the other hand the site where the non substantial ideas are far more perfectly reflected, which is why the artist or the poet can act best only selectively

borrow from nature as doctor Johnson would also later argue 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 in general and of the artists as well. The first important point to be noted about the romantic literary theory is how it distances poetry or art from the notion of imitation.

The school of thoughts initiated by Plotinus had already established the primacy of the poets mind in the artistic process and the romantic theorists retained this notion of primacy, but they interpreted the poets mind slightly differently from Plotinus. So, for Plotinus the poet was not an imitator of nature, but was an imitator nonetheless, because rather than copying nature he copied the ideas directly as they were reflected in his mind.

On the other hand for the romantics, the poets mind was not a storehouse of readymade ideal forms to be truthfully imitated in their artistic expressions. Rather, the poets mind was conceptualized as a site of vibrant creativity where forms and ideas were 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.

And, the most famous depiction of this image of a roaring and bubbling water body that overflows onto the surrounding is perhaps to be found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan, where he talks of a romantic chasm from which and I quote from the poem.

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“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.”

(“KublaKhan”, S. T. Coleridge)

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 Snowdown 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 a very important work as far as romantic literary theory is concerned, which is titled to *Biographia Literaria*.

But, before we turn to *Biographia Literaria* I would 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 in fact, championed by Pseudo Longinus. So, just like Longinus who believed that the ability of the poets mind to conceive great and noble thought out of it is own depth was the key ingredient of producing good poetry, the romantics too believed that the recesses of the poets mind were the haloed and mystical repositories of artistic creativity.

Now, for the romantics, the key element which informs the hallowed and mystical site of the poets mind is imagination. This is a very important term as far as romantic theory is concerned, but then what is imagination? Coleridge answers this question in his *Biographia Literaria* by drawing a distinction between two terms. The first term is fancy and the other term is imagination.

Now, in order to understand the meaning that Coleridge gave to these two terms we will have to first understand what is memory. 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 have 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 not imagination, but fancy and I quote Coleridge.

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“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.”

(Biographia Literaria, S. T. Coleridge)

The Fancy is indeed no other than a mood 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.

Coleridge contrasts this faculty of the mind which he calls fancy with another more potent faculty that characterizes the poets mind which she calls imagination. Now, imagination according to Coleridge is very unlike fancy and it is unlike fancy because it does not simply juxtapose fragmented images of 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.

So, I hope now the connection between imagination and the metaphor of a romantic chasm seething and roaring with it is own energy that Coleridge uses in Kubla Khan is somewhat more clear. Now, Coleridge further divides up imagination into two segments; the first is primary imagination and the next is secondary imagination. According to Coleridge the primary imagination is somewhat akin to the concept of poetic genius. It is the inherent vitality that gives the mind of the poet it is creative force. Secondary imagination, on the other hand 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.

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“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.”

(Biographia Literaria, S. T. Coleridge)

In Coleridge’s own words, The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, that is primary imagination 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 recreate; 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 or poetry 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 for instance organically grows into a plant while assimilating external influences like sunlight and water. And, this brings us to a very important point for the romantic's nature and the poets minds 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 encountered so far like for instance a Female Vagrant or The Idiot Boy or Coleridge's Young Child they are all situated amidst nature. So, much so, that they have 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.