CHAPTER - III

ENGLISH ROMANTICISM
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The term 'romantic' is perhaps the most difficult one to define. There is no denying this fact. Prof. Lovejoy in his classic on the Discriminations of Romanticism, acknowledged this and presented a few of the more recent accounts pertaining to the age and origin and nature of Romanticism.

While H. Lassere and many others regard Rousseau as the father of romanticism, Mr. Russell and Mr. Santayana hold that the honour of paternity might plausibly be claimed by Immanuel Kant. Prof. Grierson asserts that St. Paul's irruption into Greek religious thought and Greek prose was an essential example of a romantic movement. We learn from Charles Whibley that Romanticism was born in the Garden of Eden.'

Prof. Lovejoy sets against these opinions, a correspondingly, different account of a host of other critics of recent times. Mr. Paul Elmer More defines it as "the illusion of beholding the infinite within the stream of nature itself, instead of apart from that stream" - a glorification of the idea of cosmic flux."

Schelling tells us that "the classic temper studies the past, the romantic spirit neglects it .... it leads
forward and creates new precedents."

The Romantic spirit, to some, is to be associated with the heart as opposed to the head; for others, with imagination as contrasted with reason and the sense of fact; yet, to a few others' it has everything to do with the mystic feeling that one's activities have the advantages of a celestial alliance.

Notwithstanding these intricate analyses, the term came to stand for a dynamic force affecting a sweeping revolt against science, authority, tradition, order, that convulsed western civilization over a period that can be roughly dated from the late 18th century to the first quarter of the 19th century.

In general, it came to rate passion higher than reason, imagination greater than logic. Most of the Romantics rejected their world - the world they lived in and its organisation. It seemed to them rather standardized, commercialized, and mechanized. To escape from this, they turned to the remote, far-away places, folk-lore, medieval past, Nature and the common man.

It was also unquestionably accepted that Romanticism, particularly that which flourished in England in the late
18th century marked a violent reaction against formalism, exalting nature above artifice, sensibility above intellect; the search for the absolute rather than a concern with the here and now. Apart from such ideas, mentioned above, Romanticism also upheld the natural goodness of man and the possibility of man to achieve progress both in moral and material spheres.

Romanticism, thus is multi-dimensional, touching several aspects of life and thought. A full flowering of knowledge, an abundant growth of language; words acquiring the status of symbols, subtler currents of thought and feeling are the resultant phenomena of the new movement.

The classical artist delights in 'What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed' while Wordsworth - the giant of the new age-called upon poetry to cast away 'the bracelets and snuff boxes and adulterous trinkets of poetic diction' and return to her legitimate home in the heart of men and the language which is uttered by men under the actual presence of passion or at least of passion 'recollected in tranquility'.

As Grierson puts it 'it is not the subject matter that makes poetry essentially romantic. It is the conscious
contrast with reason that makes it romantic.¹

The Romantic revival of the period 1798-1820 presents a conscious transcendence of reason as in Wordsworth's

'a sense of sublime
of something far more deeply interfused'

'The great romantic knows that he lives by faith and not by reason'.

Prof. Grierson "considers classical and romantic as systole and diastole of the human heart in history. They represent two different modes - on the one hand, our need for order of synthesis, of a comprehensive yet therefore exclusive as well as inclusive ordering of thought and feeling definite ordering of feeling and action",² on the other hand, a feeling that the spiritual aspirations are being restricted, 'confined, cribbed, and the heart and imagination reach out', it may be with Faust, after the joys of this world, it may be with Rousseau Wordsworth, and Shelley after a 'return to nature', a freer, juster and a kinder

²Ibid., p. 187.
world, or it may be after ages of faith or perhaps after a past that never was a present'.

Romanticism, above all other movements proved to be unique in more than one respect. Primarily it was a tremendous development of the imaginative sensibility. The universe of sense and thought gained a new impetus, 'acquired a new potency of response, and appeal to man'. Rousseau and Kant contributed largely towards the promotion of the new modes of thinking ie humanism and idealism.

Childhood had been glorified by Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge; freedom and passion characterised the heroes and heroines of Shelley and Byron.

The ideas about man and external world underwent a drastic and plastic change. The external world is not merely a world based on the assumption that it is an aggregate or a mere assembly of isolated atoms; but a totality which involves the parts in it.

The Romantic poet's experience of the external world is not merely a system of isolated sensations or sense impre-

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3Ibid., p. 188.
essions, but a unified whole, united by self-consciousness and mostly determined by the nature of the perceiving subject. The result is an organic approach, the identification of the ideal with the real, true understanding of the inherent goodness of man, cognisance of the latent divinity in man and Nature.

Most of the major poets of this movement, Shelley, Wordsworth, Blake, Keats and Coleridge regarded the power of their imagination as 'divining Nature', not as correcting her. It was a period more creative than any other period, which habitually 'received the light reflected as the light bestowed'.

It is more of a neoplatonic concept of 'natura naturans' much opposed to the view that emphasized the form, the measure, the restraints, the attractions already, known, a dull record of men and events of the external world.

The romantic poetry, then, as Sri Aurobindo aptly described, it is 'a poetry whose task is to render truth of the spirit by passing behind the appearances of the sense, and the intellect to their spiritual reality.' It is a total negation of the principle of imitation or a mechanical projection of the external world. It is more a working of the
Imagination - a representation of what eternally exists; a dynamic principle which operates not only behind the particulars of the external world, but also in the mind of man. Sri Aurobindo therefore called these poets as the poets of the Dawn.

Coleridge describes poetry as an art to express elements which have their origin in the human mind, as the reconciliation of the external with the internal. Their view of imagination was more backed up by considerations religious and metaphysical.

The Lockean tradition which believed in mere sense perceptions and looked upon the mind as passive, a mere recorder of the impressions from without, a lazy looker-on of a world external gave rise to mechanistic interpretations of the external world. The mind in Locke's essay is said to resemble a mirror passively reflecting the objects.

''To the philosophical school of Locke, the ultimate, unanalysable particles of mental content were of course, the replicas of the simple qualities of sense - blue, hot, hard, direct, odor-of-rose-plus the replicas of the feelings of pleasure and pain. But when they talked of the making of poetry, both philosophers and literary theorists tended to
take as the unit of the process that bundle of simple qualities constituting either the whole or a splintered fragment, of a particular object of sense' .... Coleridge remarked acutely that 'mechanical philosophy' insists on a world of mutually impenetrable objects because it suffers from a 'despotism of the eye' (Biographia Literaria, 1.74; cf. Coleridge on Logic and Learning, pp 126-7). Thereby, little respect was paid to the human self. This is well grounded in a belief in the immanence of God, in their universe that the great machine of the world implies a mechanic. For Locke, poetry was more a matter of wit and its chief task for him was that of merely combining ideas. Wit, according to him, had nothing to do with truth or reality. Whereas, the romantics believed that imagination stands in some essential relation to truth and reality. The Romantics, by and large, were more concerned with feeling rather than reason, experience more than the logical argument.

Poetry is the record of moments of ennobling interchange of action from within and without; it takes on in time a psychological aspect - Objects as objects are essentially

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fixed and dead – with the realisation comes the disturbing sense that in our life alone does nature live.

That from thy self it comes, that thou must give Else never canst receive.

The chief merit of the Romantics lies in the fact that though they differed in degree and sometimes in kind too, in their attempts to create a new world – a world of theirs own – they succeeded in making others accept what they created was not far from truth or reality, nor absurd or fanciful. They cleared the misunderstanding about Locke’s limitation of perception to physical objects.

According to them, it denied the mind of its chief function. In other words, to perceive and to create—on this Blake speaks with prophetic scorn “mental things are alone real, what is called corporeal, Nobody knows of its dwelling place. Where is the existence, out of mind or thought? Where is it in the mind of food?”

As pointed out by R.A. Poiker in his *The Romantic Assertion*, 'the predominant note of Romantic poetry is its assertion, its vision of universe or a society resolved into
concord, 'of the one life within us and abroad',\(^5\) of

The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, Infinity and God.

(\textit{Wordsworth, The Prelude, XIII 183-4})