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The Age of Johnson (1744-1784)

The later half of the eighteenth century, which was dominated by Dr. Samuel Johnson, is called the *Age of Johnson*. Johnson died in 1784, and from that time the Classical spirit in English literature began to give place to the Romantic spirit, though officially the Romantic Age started from the year 1798 when Wordsworth and Coleridge published the famous *Lyrical Ballads*. Even during the Age of Johnson, which was predominantly classical, cracks had begun to appear in the solid wall of classicism and there were clear signs of revolt in favour of the Romantic spirit. This was specially noticeable in the field of poetry. Most of the poets belonging to the *Age of Johnson* may be termed as the precursors of the Romantic Revival. That is why the *Age of Johnson* is also called the *Age of Transition* in English literature.

Poets of the Age of Johnson

As has already been pointed out, the Age of Johnson in English poetry is an age of transition and experiment which ultimately led to the Romantic Revival. Its history is the history of the struggle between the old and the new, and of the gradual triumph of the new. The greatest protagonist of classicism during this period was Dr. Johnson himself, and he was supported by Goldsmith. In the midst of change these two held fast to the classical ideals, and the creative work of both of them in the field of poetry was imbued with the classical spirit. As Macaulay said, "Dr. Johnson took it for granted that the kind of poetry which flourished in his own time and which he had been accustomed to hear praised from his childhood, was the best kind of poetry, and he not only upheld its claims by direct advocacy of its canons, but also consistently opposed every experiment in which, as in the ballad revival, he detected signs of revolt against it." Johnson's two chief poems, *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, are classical on account of their didacticism, their formal, rhetorical style, and their adherence to the closed couplet.

Goldsmith was equally convinced that the classical standards of writing poetry were the best and that they had attained perfection during the Augustan Age. All that was required of the poets was to imitate those standards. According to him "Pope was the limit of classical literature." In his opposition to the blank verse, Goldsmith showed himself fundamentally hostile to change. His two important

poems, *The Traveller and The Deserted Village*, which are versified pamphlets on political economy, are classical in spirit and form. They are written in the closed couplet, are didactic, and have pompous phraseology. These poems may be described as the last great work of the outgoing, artificial eighteenth century school, though even in them, if we study them minutely, we perceive the subtle touches of the new age of Romanticism especially in their treatment of nature and rural life.

Before we consider the poets of the Age of Johnson, who broke from the classical tradition and followed the new Romantic trends, let us first examine what Romanticism stood for. Romanticism was opposed to Classicism on all vital points. For instance, the main characteristics of classical poetry were: (i) it was mainly the product of intelligence and was especially deficient in emotion and imagination; (ii) it was chiefly the town poetry; (iii) it had no love for the mysterious, the supernatural, or what belonged to the dim past; (iv) its style was formal and artificial; (v) it was written in the closed couplet; (vi) it was fundamentally didactic; (vii) it insisted on the writer to follow the prescribed rules and imitate the standard models of good writing. The new poetry which showed romantic leanings was opposed to all these points. For instance, its chief characteristics were: (i) it encouraged emotion, passion and imagination in place of dry intellectuality; (ii) it was more interested in nature and rustic life rather than in town life; (iii) it revived the romantic spirit—love of the mysterious, the supernatural, the dim past; (iv) it opposed the artificial and formal style, and insisted on simple and natural forms of expression; (v) it attacked the supremacy of the closed couplet and encouraged all sorts of metrical experiments; (vi) its object was not didactic but the expression of the writer's experience for its own sake; (vii) it believed in the liberty of the poet to choose the theme and the manner of his writing.

The poets who showed romantic leanings, during the Age of Johnson, and who may be described as the precursors or harbingers of the Romantic Revival were James Thomson, Thomas Gray, William Collins, James Macpherson, William Blake, Robert Burns, William Cowper and George Crabbe.

James Thomson (1700-1748) was the earliest eighteenth century poet who showed romantic tendency in his work. The main romantic characteristic in his poetry is his minute observation of nature. In *The Seasons* he gives fine sympathetic descriptions of the fields, the woods, the streams, the shy and wild creatures. Instead of the closed couplet, he follows the Miltonic tradition of using the blank verse. In *The Castle of Indolence*, which is written in form of dream allegory so popular in medieval literature, Thomson uses the Spenserian stanza. Unlike the didactic poetry of the Augustans, this poem is full of dim suggestions.

Thomas Gray (1716-1771) is famous as the author of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, “the best-known in the English language.” Unlike classical poetry which was characterised by restraint on personal feelings and emotions, this poem is the manifestation of deep feelings of the poet. It is suffused with the melancholy spirit which is a characteristic romantic trait. It contains deep reflections of the poet on the universal theme of death which spare no one. Other important poems of Gray are *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*. Of these *The Bard* is more original and romantic. It emphasises the independence of the poet, which became the chief characteristic of romantic poetry. All these poems of Gray follow the classical model so far as form is concerned, but in spirit they are romantic.

William Collins (1721-1759). Like the poetry of Gray, Collin’s poetry exhibits deep feelings of melancholy. His first poem, *Oriental Eclogues* is romantic in feeling, but is written in the closed couplet. His best-known poems are the odes *To Simplicity*, *To Fear*, *To the Passions*, the small lyric *How Sleep The Brave*, and the beautiful “*Ode to Evening*”. In all these poems the poet values the solitude and quietude because they afford opportunity for contemplative life. Collins in his poetry advocates return to nature and simple and unsophisticated life, which became the fundamental creeds of the Romantic Revival.

James Macpherson (1736-1796) became the most famous poet during his time by the publication of Ossianic poems, called the *Works of Ossian*, which were translations of Gaelic folk literature, though the originals were never produced, and so he was considered by some critics as a forger. In spite of this Macpherson exerted a considerable influence on contemporary poets like Blake and Burns by his poetry which was impregnated with moonlight melancholy and ghostly romantic suggestions.

William Blake (1757-1827). In the poetry of Blake we find a complete break from classical poetry. In some of his works as *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* which contain the famous poems—*Little Lamb who made thee?* and *Tiger, Tiger burning bright*, we are impressed by their lyrical quality. In other poems such as *The Book of Thel*, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, it is the prophetic voice of Blake which appeals to the reader. In the words of Swinburne, Blake was the only poet of “supreme and simple poetic genius” of the eighteenth century, “the one man of that age fit, on all accounts, to rank with the old great masters”. Some of his lyrics are, no doubt, the most perfect and the most original songs in the English language.

Robert Burns (1759-96), who is the greatest song writer in the English language, had great love for nature, and a firm belief in human dignity and quality,

both of which are characteristic of romanticism. He has summed up his poetic creed in the following stanza:

*Give me a spark of Nature's fire,
That is all the learning I desire;
Then, though I trudge through dub and mire
At plough or cart,
My Muse, though homely in attire,
May touch the heart.*

The fresh, inspired songs of Burns as *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, *To a Mouse*, *To a Mountain Daisy*, *Man was Made to Mourn* went straight to the heart, and they seemed to be the songs of the birds in spring time after the cold and formal poetry for about a century. Most of his songs have the Elizabethan touch about them.

William Cowper (1731-1800), who lived a tortured life and was driven to the verge of madness, had a genial and kind soul. His poetry, much of which is of autobiographical interest, describes the homely scenes and pleasures and pains of simple humanity—the two important characteristics of romanticism. His longest poem, *The Task*, written in blank verse, comes as a relief after reading the rhymed essays and the artificial couplets of the Age of Johnson. It is replete with description of homely scenes, of woods and brooks of ploughmen and shepherds. Cowper's most laborious work is the translation of Homer in blank verse, but he is better known for his small, lovely lyrics like *On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture*, beginning with the famous line, 'Oh, that those lips had language', and *Alexander Selkirk*, beginning with the oft-quoted line, 'I am monarch of all I survey'.

George Crabbe (1754-1832) stood midway between the Augustans and the Romantics. In form he was classical, but in the temper of his mind he was romantic. Most of his poems are written in the heroic couplet, but they depict an attitude to nature which is Wordsworthian. To him nature is a "presence, a motion and a spirit," and he realizes the intimate union of nature with man. His well-known poem, *The Village*, is without a rival as a picture of the working men of his age. He shows that the lives of the common villager and labourers are full of romantic interest. His later poems, *The Parish Register*, *The Borough*, *Tales in Verse*, and *Tales of the Hall* are all written in the same strain.

Another poet who may also be considered as the precursor of the Romantic Revival was Thomas Chatterton (1752-70), the Bristol boy, whose *The Rowley Poems*, written in pseudo-Chaucerian English made a strong appeal of medievalism. The publication of Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* in

1765 also made great contribution to the romantic mood reviving interest in ballad literature.

(b) **Prose of the Age of Johnson**

In the Age of Johnson the tradition established by prose writers of the earlier part of the eighteenth century—Addison, Steele and Swift—was carried further. The eighteenth century is called the age of aristocracy. This aristocracy was no less in the sphere of the intellect than in that of politics and society. The intellectual and literary class formed itself into a group, which observed certain rules of behaviour, speech and writing. In the field of prose the leaders of this group established a literary style which was founded on the principles of logical and lucid thought. It was opposed to what was slipshod, inaccurate, and trivial. It avoided all impetuous enthusiasm and maintained an attitude of aloofness and detachment that contributed much to its mood of cynical humour. The great prose writers, the pillars of the Age of Johnson, who represented in themselves, the highest achievements of English prose, were Johnson, Burke and Gibbon.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was the literary dictator of his age, though he was not its greatest writer. He was a man who struggled heroically against poverty and ill-health; who was ready to take up cudgels against anyone however high he might be placed, but who was very kind and helpful to the poor and the wretched. He was an intellectual giant, and a man of sterling character, on account of all these qualities he was honoured and loved by all, and in his poor house gathered the foremost artists, scholars, actors, and literary men of London, who looked upon him as their leader.

Johnson's best-known works are his *Dictionary* and *Lives of Poets*. He contributed a number of articles in the periodicals, *The Rambler*, *The Idler* and *Rasselas*. In them his style is ponderous and verbose, but in *Lives of Poets*, which are very readable critical biographies of English poets, his style is simple and at times charming. Though in the preceding generations Dryden, Addison, Steele and Swift wrote elegant, lucid and effective prose, none of them set up any definite standard to be followed by others. What was necessary in the generation when Johnson wrote, was some commanding authority that might set standard of prose style, lay down definite rules and compel others to follow them. This is what was actually done by Johnson. He set a model of prose style which had rhythm, balance and lucidity, and which could be imitated with profit. In doing so he preserved the English prose style from degenerating into triviality and feebleness, which would have been the inevitable result of slavishly imitating the prose style of great writers like Addison by ordinary writers who had not the secret of Addison's genius. The model was set by Johnson.

Though Johnson's own style is often condemned as ponderous and verbose, he could write in an easy and direct style when he chose. This is clear from *Lives of Poets* where the formal dignity of his manner and the ceremonial stateliness of his phraseology are mixed with touches of playful humour and stinging sarcasm couched in very simple and lucid prose. The chief characteristic of Johnson's prose-style is that it grew out of his conversational habit, and therefore it is always clear, forceful and frank. We may not some time agree to the views he expresses in the *Lives*, but we cannot but be impressed by his boldness, his wit, wide range and brilliancy of his style.

Burke (1729-1797) was the most important member of Johnson's circle. He was a member of the Parliament for thirty years and as such he made his mark as the most forceful and effective orator of his times. A man of vast knowledge, he was the greatest political philosopher that ever spoke in the English Parliament.

Burke's chief contributions to literature are the speeches and writings of his public career. The earliest of them were *Thoughts on the Present Discontent* (1770). In this work Burke advocated the principle of limited monarchy which had been established in England since the Glorious Revolution in 1688, when James II was made to quit the throne, and William of Orange was invited by the Parliament to become the king of England with limited powers. When the American colonies revolted against England, and the English government was trying to suppress that revolt, Burke vehemently advocated the cause of American independence. In that connection he delivered two famous speeches in Parliament. *On American Taxation* (1774) and on *Conciliation with America*, in which are embodied true statesmanship and political wisdom. The greatest speeches of Burke were, however, delivered in connection with the French Revolution, which were published as *The Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790). Here Burke shows himself as prejudiced against the ideals of the Revolution, and at time he becomes immoderate and indulges in exaggerations. But from the point of view of style and literary merit the *Reflections* stand higher, because they brought out the poetry of Burke's nature. His last speeches delivered in connection with the impeachment of Warren Hastings for the atrocities he committed in India, show Burke as the champion of justice and a determined foe of corruption, high-handedness and cruelty.

The political speeches and writings of Burke belong to the sphere of literature of a high order because of their universality. Though he dealt in them with events which happened during his day, he gave expression to ideas and impulses which were true not for one age but for all times. In the second place they occupy an honourable place in English literature on account of excellence of their style. The prose of Burke is full of fire and enthusiasm, yet supremely logical; eloquent and

yet restrained; fearless and yet orderly; steered by every popular movement and yet dealing with fundamental principles of politics and philosophy. Burke's style, in short, is restrained, philosophical, dignified, obedient to law and order, free from exaggeration and pedantry as well as from vulgarity and superficiality.

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) was the first historian of England who wrote in a literary manner. His greatest historical work—*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which is an authoritative and well-documented history, can pass successfully the test of modern research and scholarship. But its importance in literature is on account of its prose style which is the very climax of classicism. It is finished, elegant, elaborate and exhaustive. Though his style is sometimes marred by affectations and undue elaboration, yet on account of his massive intellect, and unflinching sense of literary proportion, he towers above all competitors as the model historian.