ROMANTICISM OF SHELLEY, KEATS AND BYRON

Shelley, Keats and Byron represent the second poetic generation in Romanticism. Byron was born on the eve of the French Revolution, while the rest two were born shortly after it and they are not directly affected by the commotion of it. However, revolutionary ideas seemed did not leave them untouched. They all were driven in their creative ways to revolt against reason and their unlimited independence is expressed in diverse ways. In Byron’s there is a free rebellious element, in Shelley’s there are the two elements of ecstasy and humanitarian pantheism, in Keats’ there is the element of sensuality.

*SHELLEY*:

The poetry of P.B.Shelley (1792-1822) is largely the medium for his prophetic message. He refused to receive life as it is lived, and tried to persuade others of the absence of any necessity for so doing. In the diction of him there is a feeling of upward flight. There is poignant intensity of sounds and they appear to be falling from the aerial regions. Everything for Shelley seems to be the occasion for a musical stir. In regards to his poetry, they are reflective of a mystical desire of him to transcend the joys and sufferings of ordinary mankind. His poetry is conspicuous by the suppleness and variety of prosody. The Spenserian stanza of ‘Adonais’, the terza rima of ‘The Triumph of Life’, the metrical combinations of ‘Prometheus Unbound’ are inventions of an original genius. In ‘Prometheus Unbound’, which is a lyrical drama , Shelley takes the story of how Prometheus was bound to a rock by Jupiter. He modifies the legend to glorify the spirit that man might have if he would take love as his guiding law and refuse to tolerate any tyranny. The theme of it is the moral salvation of man. In his verses there is a breath of the eternal spirit.

‘Defence of Poetry’ is Shelley’s aesthetic essay, where he defines poetry as “the expression of imagination” and considers it to be “connate with the origin of man”. Poetry to Shelley is a vision and not an art. Therefore he says that “A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds.”

*KEATS:*

Keats’ poetry is devoid of the Romantic attitudes of all the other poets of his time. He did not write poetry for ‘self-worshipping’; there is rather something of an element of impersonality to be noticed in his poetry. He said: “Scenery is fine-but human nature is finer.” One does not go to read his poems for scenes and landscapes drawn in subjective moods and emotions, or for anything like the Wordsworthian conviction of some spiritual significance in nature, or for any sense of mystery in nature. Keats enjoys nature only as a simple means of the initial inspiration for poetic moods. Keats, however, had firm belief in the supreme value of the imagination. Says he: “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth…” Such an idea of Beauty is echoed by several of his poems.

Keats’ poetry displays his romantic fondness for the unfamiliar and strange and for whatever is remote in place and time. He, for example, in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ refers to Ruth, a Biblical character, who in loyalty to the mother of her dead husband had to leave her native place and had to come to live with people she did not know. At the hours of her pang of isolation in that alien land, the nightingale sang full-throated to pacify her heart:

“Perhaps the self-same song that found a path/ Through the heart of Ruth, when sick for home./She stood in tears amid the alien corn;”

Reading the first few lines of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, we can get an overall impression about the romantic inspiration that Keats talks about. He gets this inspiration from the objects of nature. In regards to this poem, the song of the nightingale brings to his heart a singular kind of elevation and it then heightens his passion, (as he says)to be:

“on the viewless wings of poesy”

It is at such a point of psychological elevation of him that he could transcend the limits of the ordinary cognitive world. Sensation for Keats, as for Wordsworth, was cognitive, it was a path to the knowledge of reality and he attempts at rendering it persuasively in his poetry. No doubt then, in the process of arriving at the knowledge of reality, imagination has to play a major role. By his vivid imagination he recreated the old world of medieval romance, the world of Elizabethan romance, and the varied romance of beauty, love, chivalry and adventure. To him poetry was a world of imagination for the poet to see visions and dream visions. No wonder then that in the concluding part of the poem: ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ the poet asks the two questions : (1)was it all a vision only ?(2) was it a waking dream only?

To Keats Greek mythology was a perpetual and living source of pleasure and also of heightened awareness of the natural world (Ref. “Ode on a Grecian Urn”). The romance and artistic glory of the medieval world are also presented in a number of other poems (Ref. “The Eve of St. Agnes”, “The Eve of St. Mark”, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”).

For Keats, ‘a thing of beauty is a joy for ever’. Later on, he identified beauty with truth, and in ‘Hyperion’ he declared:

“For it’s the eternal law/that first in beauty should be first in might”

Romanticism had its roots in the soil of melancholy and weird sadness. In Keats’ poetry the note of melancholy and sadness is at many a place. We hear the same note in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode to Melancholy”.

If Keats was a Romantic, he was also a Classicist, not as Pope’s school understood the word, but in the sense that he had much of the spirit of the old Greeks- a desire for a perfect rather than an adumbrated (something vaguely presented) beauty; a delight in finished workmanship; a feeling for form. In his Odes he affected a harmonious union between classical order and romantic spontaneity, classical restraint and romantic exuberance.

Negative Capability:

Yet, for Keats, the necessary precondition of poetry is submission to tings as they are, without trying to intellectualize them into something else. Keats offered his formulation of ‘Negative Capability’ in his letter to George and Tom: “… several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously- I mean ‘negative Capability’-that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

Well, to explain a bit, the concept of Negative Capability involves self-annihilation of disinterestedness. Keats discovered that to comprehend experience and to attain freedom from its bondage, what is necessary is self-annihilation. It requires that an essential quality of a great poet is his immense capacity of sympathetic identification with some object dearer to him than himself. Keats believed that Wordsworth and Coleridge did not possess Negative Capability (they could not annihilate the self). He believed that Shakespeare exemplified wonderful sympathy and identification with variety of experiences. Since Keats believed in poet’s submission to the chaos of experience, his theory is antithetical to fact (in the sense of scientific proof or evidence), reason and order. Anyway, to be precise, Negative Capability’ is a theory of sympathetic identification in which the poet takes on, through participation, the quality and character of his object. The odes of Keats are the supreme examples of Negative Capability’, since they are produced solely by the methods peculiar to poetry, not by the aid of the speculative intelligence. We can trace the example of ‘Negative Capability’ in some of Keats’ Odes(In ‘Ode to Indolence’, for example, the poet is in a state of restlessness, uncertainty and doubt.

(Tomorrow, I am going to give you a brief account of Byron’s Romanticism)