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On Going a Journey: Hazlitt's Ode to Poetic Sensibility

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Abstract:

William Hazlitt, the well-known Romantic essayist, revolutionised the field of English Essays by his experimental prose writings. Pursuing the motto of freedom and equality to the hilt, he made his prose 'free' from the monotony of conventional stylistics and endeavoured to make it 'equal' to contemporary poetry; and in the process paved the way for the democratisation of English essay. His essay "On Going a Journey" is replete with poetic allusions that are intricately interwoven in the eloquent prose of the essayist. The essay, indeed, subtly exhibits Hazlitt's assaying with poetic sensibility, as it begins with borrowed poetic expressions but ends with some of his own impeccable poetic images and artistry. Taking cues from his illustrious contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge, Hazlitt hones his poetic sensibility in the essay and evolves his trademark poetic prose. Present paper attempts to analyse gradual evolution of Hazlitt's poetic sensibility as manifested in the essay "On Going a Journey" which is indeed Hazlitt's journey towards attaining poetic excellence.

Keywords: Hazlitt, Poetic Prose, Romanticism.

Introduction:

William Hazlitt's name as Romantic essayist is permanently etched in the annals of English Prose. His knack for transforming personal experience into philosophical ruminations has earned him a respectable position in the troika of Romantic Essayists that also comprises Lamb and De Quincey. However, it is a well-known fact that Hazlitt always wanted to emulate his idol Samuel Taylor Coleridge. From the years of his early adolescence, he worshipped Coleridge no less than a demi-god. Hazlitt explicitly confesses that the only real genius that he

met in his entire life was Coleridge. His essay "On Going a Journey" bears testimony to the fact that Hazlitt wanted to be as prolific a poet as Coleridge, but lacked poetic sensibility.

Analysis:

Before coming to the discussion whether Hazlitt had poetic sensibility or not, it would be appropriate to understand and analyse what poetic sensibility really means. Since the time Plato deprecated poetry and poets in his *Republic*, and his disciple Aristotle defended it in his *Poetics*, poetry has acquired a pivotal position in the realm of literary aesthetics. Emphasising upon the significance of poetry Aristotle states that poetry springs from two basic instincts of human nature, namely, "the instinct of Imitation" and "the instinct for harmony and rhythm" (3). Thus, rhyme and meter were considered inevitable in poetry. The norms of classical poetry were revived in Neo-classical poetry wherein Alexander Pope emphatically asserted that poetry was "Nature to advantage dressed/What oft was thought but never so well expressed" (*Essay on Criticism* Part 2). Form of poetry became more important than the content. But coming to Romantic Revival, the notion of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity flew from France to England and poetry was democratised by William Wordsworth who advocated that poetry should be written in the language of common man. Wordsworth's notion of poetry implicated spontaneity as the key element in the process of poetry composition. Through the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth endeavoured to make poetry conversational in nature. What makes Wordsworthian notion of poetry pertinent is the fact that paradigmatic changes were taking place even in the social, political and religious sphere. In England Monarchy was giving way to democracy, and literary readership was becoming less aristocratic and elite and more populist in its reach and scope. In such a scenario Wordsworth's approach towards poetry was apposite. Coleridge endorsed similar views in his 'conversation' poems by taking cues from spoken prose. As Uttara Natarajan points out:

'Conversation' also facilitates the Coleridgean ideal of organic form, enabling Coleridge to replace, in these poems, the traditional stanza structure of poetry with one that follows the more natural breaks and pauses of spoken prose; in this regard too, poetry, beginning in the human, may, by that token, attain the ideal. (111)

It is, however, explicit that Coleridge and Wordsworth's endeavour was to emulate spoken prose not the written one.

Prose as a literary genre maintained its distinction from poetry overtly evident since the time of its inception. Political and religious writings were earlier done in prose. Prose became popular among the masses when Francis Bacon developed English essay on the lines of Montaigne's French *essai*. Bacon's aphoristic prose style established English essay as a form of serious literature. In the succeeding Neo-Classical age essay took a turn toward wit and humour filled periodical essays of Addison and Steele. In the age of Romantic revival essay became an instrument of communicating personal experiences in the garb of philosophical musings by the triumvirate of Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey.

Hazlitt's style in his essays is evidently poetic prose that makes him a forerunner of literary revolution along with Wordsworth and Coleridge for conflating the boundaries of poetry and prose. His essay "On Going a Journey" exhibits his sincere attempts at evolving poetic sensibility. The initial part of the essay is replete with poetic allusions from other poets such as Bloomfield's "The Farmer's boy", Cowper's "Retirement" and "The Task", Milton's "Comus" and "Paradise Lost", Fletcher's "Faithful Shepherdess". Commenting on Hazlitt's use of poetic allusions in prose Jillian M Hess writes in her paper "Reframing Poetry: The Romantic Essay and the Prospects of Verse":

Hazlitt . . . quotes in this manner, using other authors' words to further his own point, and maintaining a critical distance between his text and another's. Yet, frequently in his essays, he uses a second (and to my mind far more interesting) style of quotation in which he repurposes other texts and makes them serve the topic, range, and rhythm of his own prose. (345)

Another reason for quoting these poets is that Hazlitt himself lacks poetic sensibility, as he confesses: "Had I words and images at command like these, I would attempt to wake the thoughts that lie slumbering on golden ridges in the evening clouds: but at the sight of Nature my fancy, poor as it is, droops and closes up its leaves, like flowers at sunset." It, however, can be observed from the previous quote that Hazlitt draws vivid word pictures in his essay which are akin to poetic imagery. Few more instances of poetic imagery can be seen in the following lines:

“I laugh I run, I leap, I sing for joy”

“I want to see my vague notions float like the down of the thistle before the breeze, and not to have them entangled in the briars and thorns of controversy”

Hazlitt rues the fact that he lacks poetic imagination and yet indulges in vivid display of his poetic sensibility throughout the essay. The paradox of his situation finds close parallel in Wordsworth's use of language of the common man in his poetry. While justifying his “prosaisms” in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth asserts:

. . . not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written. (6)

In a rather unapologetic manner Wordsworth advocates blurring of boundary between poetry and prose; and further to prove his point quotes renowned poets like Milton and Gray. Wordsworth's assertion “there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition” is carried forward by William Hazlitt in his essays. Tom Paulin in his book *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* compares Hazlitt's stylistic radicalism with that of Wordsworth: “If Wordsworth's famous *Preface* started to break down the poetry-prose opposition from the side of verse, Hazlitt's numerous essays worried at what prose could be from the other” (as cited in Smith,1999, p.5). Though Wordsworth refrains from using figure of speech as “mechanical device of style” to make his language more natural, Hazlitt takes recourse to Simile, Metaphor and Personification to make his prose poetic:

“When I am in the country I wish to vegetate like the country”

“The soul of a journey is liberty”

“You cannot read the book of Nature without being perpetually put to the trouble of translating it for the benefit of others”

Hazlitt was highly impressed by the poetic genius of Coleridge, who once invited him to stay in his house for two weeks. It was during this time that Hazlitt got the opportunity to meet Wordsworth and get an insight into his poetic philosophy. Hazlitt incessantly endeavoured to emulate Coleridge who according to Hazlitt had the ability to “go on in the most delightful explanatory way over hill and dale a summer's day, and convert a landscape into a didactic poem or a Pindaric ode.” Hazlitt wishes “If I could so clothe my ideas in sounding and flowing words, I might perhaps wish to have someone with me to admire the swelling theme.” Hazlitt’s poetic sensibility evolves on the lines of Wordsworth who recollects his “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” in tranquillity. Hazlitt also admits that “I can make nothing out on the spot: I must have time to collect myself.” Both Wordsworth and Hazlitt bring their primary imagination into work at the time of receiving influence from nature, but their secondary imagination is active only at the time they recollect their powerful feelings in tranquillity. If Wordsworth and Hazlitt are analysed from the perspective of Aristotle’s theory of imitation that consists of three basic aspects-object of imitation, manner of imitation and medium of imitation, their literary oeuvre will have similar object and manner of imitation. Medium of imitation, apparently, is the only difference between the two.

While analysing Hazlitt’s poetic sensibility one cannot ignore Coleridge’s view on the process of poetic creation, since Coleridge’s was the single most formative influence on Hazlitt. In the fourteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge states that “a poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed.” In some cases, the object proposed can be simply a recollection of emotions in the form of a metrical composition that is different from prose. But where a poetic form is forcefully imposed on words to distinguish it from prose, no real poetry can sprout. Real poetry, according to Coleridge, is one,

which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure; not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct ratification from each component part.

Coleridge, like Aristotle, emphasises upon the form of poetry as an organic whole, where each and every component part is essential for the consonance of the whole. To achieve this end

Coleridge and Wordsworth take recourse to the language of conversation in their poetry. Nevertheless, more than Wordsworth and Coleridge's poetry, Hazlitt's Familiar essays are better poised to "embody the ideal without being metamorphosed into poetry" (Natarajan 111). As to the organic form, the essay "On Going a Journey" consists of multiple poetic allusions that are meticulously interwoven into the eloquent prose of the essayist. The method of bringing diverse elements from external sources and binding them together might have led to a crude mechanical mixture, but Hazlitt here employs his poetic sensibility and amalgamates these external substances into an organic whole, wherein each and every element seems to be indispensable. Poetic allusions are used extensively yet seamlessly so as to convey an idea that takes birth in Hazlitt's mind but which he fails to communicate in his own words with desired intensity. Commenting on his inability to give words to his feelings Hazlitt confesses, "There is a feeling in the air, a tone in the colour of a cloud, which hits your fancy, but the effect of which you are unable to account for." Hazlitt's despair finds an echo in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" that is considered a dirge to Coleridge's dying poetic sensibility:

I see them all so excellently fair,

I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

Hazlitt's predicament can also be explained by relating it to T S Eliot's theory of objective correlative. An objective correlative, according to Eliot, is "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (para 7). In the essay "On Going a Journey", initially Hazlitt struggles to find an objective correlative for conveying his feelings and emotions; he subsequently employs poetic allusions as correlatives. In the later part of the essay Hazlitt, nevertheless, finds his own correlatives. Following examples can be noted:

"These hours are sacred to silence and to musing, to be treasured up in the memory, and to feed the source of smiling thoughts hereafter"

"The confused, busy murmur of the place was like oil and wine poured into my ears"

While analysing Hazlitt's poetic sensibility from Eliot's theory of objective correlative, one obvious contradiction is that Eliot advocates impersonality of poetry, whereas Hazlitt's romantic sensibility is essentially subjective in nature. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" exhorts poets to become impersonal, since "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (para 17). Therefore, he advises poets to use "objective" correlative. Hazlitt, however, is a quintessential Romantic. Subjectivity for him is a gospel truth. His inspiration comes from Montaigne whose great merit was that he was the first modern writer "to say as an author what he felt as a man" (as cited in Porter, 2013). All the essays of Hazlitt are personal in nature. At times it seems that he is having a conversation with his own self. At the beginning of the essay "On Going a Journey" Hazlitt states, "one of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself". Throughout the essay "On Going a Journey" Hazlitt reiterates how much he likes his own company:

"I like solitude, when I give myself up to it for the sake of solitude"

"I like to be either entirely to myself, or entirely at the disposal of others"

"I like to have it all my own way"

Hazlitt's apparent narcissism is an outcome of the contemporary spirit of Romanticism, which acknowledges significance of each and every individual and rigorously demands for freedom of expression. David Halpin in his essay "Hazlitt's contrariness and familiar prose style" describes him as "a secular republican who consistently raged in his writings against the way in which powerful minorities, and monarchs in particular, seek to subjugate majorities, limiting their freedom of expression and livelihood" (295). Hazlitt, therefore, follows the motto of freedom and equality, the guiding principle of French Revolution. And like his Romantic cohorts indulges in nature worship. He loves nature as much as he loves his own self. Personification of nature is a key element in the essay "On Going a Journey":

"Nature is company enough for me"

"You cannot read the book of Nature without being perpetually put to the trouble of translating it for the benefit of others"

“. . . an inn restores us to the level of Nature, and quits scores with society!”

Conclusion:

Looking at the theme, structure, style and language of the essay “On Going a Journey” it is evident that it has all the elements of Romantic Poetry and yet the fact remains that it is not poetry but piece of poetic prose that exhibits Hazlitt's manoeuvrings with poetic sensibility. Hazlitt's unconventional prose writing set the stage for democratisation of English essay by propagating freedom of expression in an unbridled manner and blurring generic borders of poetry and prose.

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