

Prose-Writers of the Romantic Age

Though the Romantic period specialised in poetry, there also appeared a few prose-writers—Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey—who rank very high. There was no revolt of the prose-writers against the eighteenth century comparable to that of the poets, but a change had taken place in the prose-style also.

Whereas many eighteenth century prose-writers depended on assumptions about the suitability of various prose styles for various purposes which they shared with their relatively small but sophisticated public; writers in the Romantic period were rather more concerned with subject matter and emotional expression than with appropriate style. They wrote for an ever-increasing audience which was less homogeneous in its interest and education than that of their predecessors. There was also an indication of a growing distrust of the sharp distinction between matter and manner which was made in the eighteenth century, and of a Romantic preference for spontaneity rather than formality and contrivance. There was a decline of the 'grand' style and of most forms of contrived architectural prose written for what may be called public or didactic purposes. Though some Romantic poets—Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron—wrote excellent prose in their critical writings, letters and journals, and some of the novelists like Scott and Jane Austen were masters of prose-style, those who wrote prose for its own sake in the form of the essays and attained excellence in the art of prose-writing were Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey.

(i) Charles Lamb (1775-1834)

Charles Lamb is one of the most lovable personalities in English literature. He lived a very humble, honest, and most self-sacrificing life. He never married, but devoted himself to the care of his sister Mary, ten years his senior, who was subject to mental fits, in one of which she had fatally wounded her mother. In his *Essays of Elia* (1823) and *Last Essays* (1833), in which is revealed his own personality, he talks intimately to the readers about himself, his quaint whims and experiences, and the cheerful and heroic struggle which he made against misfortunes. Unlike Wordsworth who was interested in natural surroundings and shunned society, Lamb who was born and lived in the midst of London street, was deeply interested in the city crowd, its pleasures and occupations, its endless comedies and tragedies, and in his essays he interpreted with great insight and human sympathy that crowded human life of joys and sorrows.

Lamb belongs to the category of intimate and self-revealing essayists, of whom Montaigne is the original, and Cowley the first exponent in England. To the informality of Cowley he adds the solemn confessional manner of Sir Thomas Browne. He writes always in a gentle, humorous way about the sentiments and trifles of everyday. The sentimental, smiling figure of 'Elia' in his essays is only a cloak with which Lamb hides himself from the world. Though in his essays he plays with trivialities, as Walter Pater has said, "We know that beneath this blithe surface there is something of the domestic horror, of the beautiful heroism, and devotedness too, of the old Greek tragedy."

The style of Lamb is described as 'quaint', because it has the strangeness which we associate with something old-fashioned. One can easily trace in his English the imitations of the 16th and 17th century writers he most loved—Milton, Sir Thomas

Browne, Fuller, Burton, Issac Walton. According to the subject he is treating, he makes use of the rhythms and vocabularies of these writers. That is why, in every essay Lamb's style changes. This is the secret of the charm of his style and it also prevents him from ever becoming monotonous or tiresome. His style is also full of surprises because his mood continually varies, creating or suggesting its own style, and calling into play some recollection of this or that writer of the older world.

Lamb is the most lovable of all English essayists, and in his hand the Essay reached its perfection. His essays are true to Johnson's definition; 'a loose sally of the mind.' Though his essays are all criticisms or appreciations of the life of his age and literature, they are all intensely personal. They, therefore, give us an excellent picture of Lamb and of humanity. Though he often starts with some purely personal mood or experience he gently leads the reader to see life as he saw it, without ever being vain or self-assertive. It is this wonderful combination of personal and universal interest together with his rare old style and quaint humour, which have given his essays his perennial charm, and earned for him the covetable title of "The Prince among English Essayists".

(ii) William Hazlitt (1778-1830)

As a personality Hazlitt was just the opposite of Lamb. He was a man of violent temper, with strong likes and dislikes. In his judgment of others he was always downright and frank, and never cared for its effect on them. During the time when England was engaged in a bitter struggle against Napoleon, Hazlitt worshipped him as a hero, and so he came in conflict with the government. His friends left him one by one on account of his aggressive nature, and at the time of his death only Lamb stood by him.

Hazlitt wrote many volumes of essays, of which the most effective is *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) in which he gives critical portraits of a number of his famous contemporaries. This was a work which only Hazlitt could undertake because he was outspoken and fearless in the expression of his opinion. Though at times he is misled by his prejudices, yet taking his criticism of art and literature as a whole there is not the least doubt that there is great merit in it. He has the capacity to see the whole of his author most clearly, and he can place him most exactly in relation to other authors. In his interpretation of life in the general and proper sense, he shows an acute and accurate power of observation and often goes to the very foundation of things. Underneath his light and easy style there always flows an undercurrent of deep thought and feeling.

The style of Hazlitt has force, brightness and individuality. Here and there we find passages of solemn and stately music. It is the reflection of Hazlitt's personality—outspoken, straightforward and frank. As he had read widely, and his mind was filled with great store of learning, his writings are interspersed with sentences and phrases from other writers and there are also echoes of their style. Above all, it vibrates with the vitality and force of his personality, and so never lapses into dullness.

(iii) Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859)

De Quincey is famous as the writer of 'impassioned prose'. He shared the reaction of his day against the severer classicism of the eighteenth century, preferring rather the ornate manner of Jeremy Taylor, Sir Thomas Browne and their contemporaries. The specialty of his style consists in describing incidents of purely personal interest in language suited to their magnitude as they appear in the eyes of

the writer. The reader is irresistibly attracted by the splendour of his style which combines the best elements of prose and poetry. In fact his prose works are more imaginative and melodious than many poetical works. There is revealed in them the beauty of the English language. The defects of his style are that he digresses too much, and often stops in the midst of the fine paragraph to talk about some trivial thing by way of jest. But in spite of these defects his prose is still among the few supreme examples of style in the English language.

De Quincey was a highly intellectual writer and his interests were very wide. Mostly he wrote in the form of articles for journals and he dealt with all sorts of subjects—about himself and his friends, life in general, art, literature, philosophy and religion. Of his autobiographical sketches the best-known is his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in which he has given us, in a most interesting manner, glimpses of his own life under the influence of opium. He wrote fine biographies of a number of classical, historical and literary personages, of which the most ambitious attempt is *The Caesars*. His most perfect historical essay is on *Joan of Arc*. His essays on principle of literature are original and penetrating. The best of this type is the one where he gives the distinction between the literature of knowledge and of power. *On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* is the most brilliant. He also wrote very scholarly articles on Goethe, Pope, Schiller and Shakespeare. Besides these he wrote a number of essays on science and theology.

In all his writings De Quincey asserts his personal point of view, and as he is a man of strong prejudices, likes and dislikes, he often gives undue emphasis on certain points. The result is that we cannot rely on his judgment entirely. But there is no doubt that his approach is always original and brilliant which straightway captures the attention of the reader. Moreover, the splendour of his 'poetic prose' which is elaborate and sonorous in its effects, casts its own special spell. The result is that De Quincey is still one of the most fascinating prose-writers of England.