**Semester 4**

Dejection; an Ode

The poem opens with a four-line quote from the 'Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence' first printed by Thomas Percy in his 'Reliques of Ancient English Poetry' in 1765. The romantic poets of the nineteenth century were greatly influenced by Percy's collection. In the lines quoted by Coleridge, the speaker says that he has seen the old Moon holding the new Moon in her arms and he is frightened. He fears that a deadly storm might follow. Such strange forebodings take place in nature. The relevance of these lines is that Coleridge wants such a storm to come in his life to arouse him from the spiritual slumber he is now in. The slumber is painful to the poet because it deprives him of his enjoyment of life and nature, and makes him unable to write poetry. At some stage of life Wordsworth also felt the same crisis and he has pictured it in his 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality'. Shelley's invocation of the west wind is also in the same spirit. But unlike these two poets. Coleridge is very sentimental and that makes the immortality Ode and the West Wind Ode superior in quality to Coleridge's 'Dejection'. 'Dejection: an ode' is a verse letter written to a 'Lady'. There is doubt about the identity of this Lady, in all likelihood it was Sara Hutchinson. But in a letter to his friend Poole. Coleridge gave him the impression that the poem was addressed to him. Later he told some people that it was addressed to Wordsworth. It was originally addressed to Wordsworth and subsequently 'William' was replaced by 'Lady'. Coleridge, however, meant that it could be addressed to anybody with a happy disposition and contended mind. The poem is actually about the poet himself; it is a kind of confession. One confesses to one who is just the opposite type: a sinner to a holy priest, a guilty person to one who is pure of heart, and a sad man to one who is full of joy. It does not matter much whether it is addressed to Sara or Poole or Wordsworth: what matters is that it is a dejected Coleridge confessing his failings to one who is enviably joyous. Originally the poem had 340 lines. Later Coleridge cut it short to 139 lines and divided it into eight parts. The drastic revision was made by Coleridge the critic who expunged the 'too personal' details and retained only those of universal significance but the revision has also taken away much of its beauty. At times the truncation becomes uncomfortably perceptible. Humphry House believes that the revision has affected its merit, in its revised version, hc maintains. 'It fails to achieve complete artistic unity, it is not a whole poem." 30.6.3 Substance , In the four-line quote from the 'Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence' thcre is the foreboding of a deadly storm, Such deadly storms, however destructive, bring about a change by causing a stir in the soil and making the plants sprout out of seeds. The poet feels that he is lying dormant and requires a new lease of poetic life. He wants to shake off his dullness and be creative once again. The poet has melancholy of a subdued kind. It does not burst into any strong emotion. It is corroding his mind. He looks around and sees that everything in nature is excellently fair but he is not deeply touched by anything, He sees, but does not feel. He has lost his genial spirits. The beauty of natural objects can no more lift from his heart the overwhelming burden of his grief. His attempt to gaze at the green light on the western horizon is futile, The real sources of passion and life are within one's heart and when they have dried up he cannot expect the external forces to animate him. Man receives from nature what he gives to nature. Nature lives in our life. Her joys and sorrows are taken from man. It appears to be happy or sad according to our mood. The objects of nature are lifeless and cold. If we want to see some high or noble quality in nature, something better than the commonplace, we must send forth a light, a glory, and a radiance, to cover the natural objects, from our heart. Sweet and powerful voice must come out of human feelings to endow the sounds of nature with sweet charm. The lady addressed to is pure of heart. So she is full of joy. Therefore to her nature is always-festive, The poet finds a contrast between his mood and the mood of the Lady. The poet remembers that in his earlier days he had this joy though the path of his life was rough. In those days he even used his misfortunes as material to weave visions of delight. Then hope grew around him like a creeper growing around a tree. Natural objects seemed to be his own, as if an extension of his own personality. But now his care-worn heart has no joy. He cares little for this loss ofjoy but his loss of imagination is the real loss. He was born with superb power of imagination but it is almost dead now. He tried to be patient, forgetting the loss he had suffered, So he tried to cultivate the study of metaphysics so that once again he could be 'natural man' who does not sigh or shed tears all the time. This was his plan. He practised it but it did not 'help him much. Tangled in metaphysics, he is still sad, unable to rouse imagination in him, unable to be creative, thoroughly incapacitated, and so melancholy. The poet's mind is in the grip of sad thoughts born of the tragic reality of his life. I-Ie, wants to get rid of them so that he can listen to the wind once again. In the raving wind he hears a prolonged scream of agony. It is a 'mad' scream, arid the poet thinks that the wind should go to places where its howling will not sound so discordant as it does here - to bare crag, mountain, to some blasted tree, some pine grove far away from any woodman's reach, or some witch-haunted lonely house. It is now causing havoc in this rainy month of April, creating the atmosphere of 'Devil's Christmas'. The tragic atmosphere is full of the painful sound of the wind. So the wind is like an actor, or even a poet. The sound made by the wind at the moment seems to be similar to the one made by a retreating army, its members groaning in pain and quivering in cold. The sound is silent and there is a brief pause. Then another sound is heard, less fearful, a bit pleasant even. It is like the tender story, written by Thomas Otway, of a little girl who lost her way on a desolate moor near her home. The little girl moaned low in grief and fear, and at times screamed loudly so that her mother might hear her and come to her rescue. The wind is imitating these sounds. Care-worn the poet is sleepless, but he wants that his 'friend' may never suffer this sleeplessness. Sleep is a wonderful anodyne that heals all ailments. In the night the storm may blow and the stars may twinkle, but they cannot touch the person in profound sleep. The poet wishes her to rise in the morning, joyous and cheerful. He wants that the purity and freshness of her heart. There is something divine in her heart and all things in nature should share that celestial element. The poet wants her to rejoice forever. May no 'dejection' be in her life. 30.6.4 Interpretation In Shelley, it is dialectics: if winter comes spring cannot be far behind. In Coleridge it is erratic, incomprehensible, magical. If the old Moon is in the lap of the new Moon, a storm is in the offing. The thin crescent moon is bordering the whole of the moon which is visible in the form of a faint shadow, and it is a rare sight, and Coleridge, like the writer af the 'Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence' believes that it forebodes a sudden stir in nature in the form of a strong gale. Coleridge He himself is passing through a dull, monotonous phase. There is pain in his heart which is gradually corroding him. There is no violence in this pain, nothing spectacular about it. Dull, boring pain, like weevil, is eating into the vitals of his personality. He wants a big shake, a storm, to rouse him to creativity. Shelley prays to the West Wind to make him its lyre, to lift him from the thorns of life where he has fallen: Coleridge does not have that strength for prayer. He also needs that kind of a lift, but he knows that it 'can come to him, if at all, through a miracle. There can be no 'reason' behind it, nor can prayer do anything, but strange things happen in nature, call it supernatural, and so a strange turn may come in his life also. Pain is corroding, self-defeating, unproductive. He needs joy which is elating, purposeful and creative. Wordsworth also felt the same crisis. 'Dejection: an Ode' was written in 1802 and Wordsworth's .'Ode on Intimations of Immortality' was written in 1806. Prior to the writing of these poems the two poets had identical feelings, long discussions, and apprehenisions of a failure of' their only talent. With Coleridge it was a deeper crisis. C.M. Bowra points out: ''He knew that something catastrophic had happened to him, and he was afraid that his creative gifts were ruined. He put the blame on his lack of happiness but he knew that whatever the cause might be, the results were grave indeed.'' Wordsworth tried to overcome the feeling with the help of a broad philosophy, a larger view of life. Much of his 'Ode' is a reply to Coleridge's problem, and indirectly he helps himself too. He addresses Sara Hutchinson and says that she is full of joy, and so to her everything is blissful, whereas he is full of sadness and therefore to him everything is dreary. (When Coleridge cut the poem short to half its original length, Sara Hutchinson' became the 'Lady' : many people think that originally it was not Sara but Wordsworth whom the poet had addressed. Whatever it might have been, in its final form the address is to the 'Lady' . It makes the poem impersonal). Woidsworth turns to Coleridge's six-year-old child Hartley and finds exuberance in him. .The child's unbridled joy makes him philosophise about life and its growth through years. And he feels that through philosophical understanding one can rationalise the loss and regain confidence. Wordsworth never seeins to be entirely broken down, but Coleridge is out and out a wreck. It is so, more because of Coleridge's idea that nature cannot be benign enough to extend a hand of comfort in our hours of need because she does not have any distinct entity: she is not a positive force. She is just what we make of her. If we are happy we see happiness everywhere in nature and that makes us all the more happy, and if we are sad we see sadness every-where in nature and that makes us gloomier. Coleridge comes close to Tagore's subjective philosophy:- 'T is the colous of hy consciousness That makes the emerald green , and the ruby red. I look up to the sky and light flashes in the east and the west. I see the rose and call "Beautiful'". And it turns beautiful. (Tr. D. Ganguly) But Tagore's 'I' is part of godhead, and Coleridge's 'we' is nothing more than the human mind and its reflexes. He knows that the Lady is full of joy which is given only to the pure of heart. When we are very close to nature this joy is born in our I heart, and as it matures it gives birth to other joys and everything turns colourful and rnelodious. There was a time in Coleridge's life alqo when be experiwced this celestial joy which enabled him to overcome all strain and suffering. His imagination was very active at that time, but thereafter each moment of dejection has weakened his imagination and enervated his soul. He turned to philosophy, tried to get some solace in broad generalizations about human fate. Metaphysical ideas have all the more destroyed his poetic faculties. The poet is unhappy that he has turned away . I from existence to essence, from experience to philosophy, but he knows that it is all . A strong gale is replaced by a'tender wind, as tender as Ornay's story of a small girl who had lost her mother in a lonely wood. The strong wind or the tender breeze, mind in great ruffle or in the grip of subdued, gnawing pin, it is the suffering of being uncreative. The entire poem is an implicit prayer for spontaneous joy- the kind of joy that the Lady has - because that joy alone can revive the lost poetic inspiration. Life's experiences become universal metaphor and the i 'confessional' comes through significant nature imagery. The 139-line poem is divided into eight uneven parts. It has a single theme-- dejection, need for love to overcome it and prayer to nature for a stormy shake up -- and it is elaborated in great length. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is also divided into parts; seven in all. But in that poem the narrative develops part by part, sequentially. Here it is one emotional situation. Division into parts gives the semblance, of course, of a mini epic. The situation is so vital for the poet, the involvement so great, the urgency so acute, that he feels that some amount of epic expanse is necessary to accommodate all.