POETRY, A PURIFYING FORCE: A STUDY OF SIDNEY’S CONCEPT OF “OTHER NATURE” IN APOLOGY FOR POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is a purifying and humanizing force. It enhances the beauty and glory of the world. Writing poetry is an execution of a high-flying fancy that transcends the limitations of dry reality, and changes the real into an ideal world. The poet as maker is blessed with a power to make goodness highly pleasant and highly alluring.

KEYWORDS: Sublimity, Transmutation, Grandeur, Inspiration, Apology, Zodiac

INTRODUCTION

Elevation of Human Mind

Sidney’s concept of “other nature” in Apology for Poetry (1595), expounds a philosophical justification for all imagination writing that nourishes the seeds of civility in man. Art is not an imitation, but an invention of a new nature, the creation of a “speaking picture” (Sidney 25). It stirs the streams of sublimity in man and “turns into gold all poisonous waters” (Shelley 252). Like Emerson, Sidney feels that the poet combines surface reality with the divinely perceived sublime ideas. However, the nature created by the poet, is not a “picture postcard” but an unbidden, unseen, uplifting force that by purifying the unfathomable regions of mind, enters into the practical experience of the reader. “Poetry is a world of which poets are articulate and readers the inarticulate part” (James Reeves 71). It is an educational and uplifting world, both ideal and eternal, both instructive and entertaining.

Yet the world created by the poet is never in contradiction with the real world. It is not completely imaginative and incongruous; it is not a free play of bizarre fancy that offends the pleasant curiosity of the reader. Poetic invention is strictly confined to what is proper, probable and pleasant. It seems new and fine only because the moral standards revealed in it are better than we generally apply in practical life. ‘The second nature’ comes out of the first “as a leaf out of a tree”(Emerson 62). The urgency and seriousness of mission and the vitality of delightful expression are so intensely interfused that one fails to resist his allurement to the images of perfection.

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done;
neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful
trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor
whatsoever else may make the too much
loved earth more lovely; her world is
brazen, the poets only deliver a golden (24).
The years preceding the publication of Sidney’s *Apology For Poetry* witnessed an intensified agitation against imaginative literature. Church, which governed the medieval intellect, distrusted all poetry unless it was conducive to moral nourishment. Poetry was supposed to be potentially dangerous, corrupting mankind with wanton desires and thereby enfeebling moral fiber of human community. Taking advantage of Plato’s arguments against poetry, and the banishment of poets from his ideal state, Puritans condemned poets as “plague-stricken” infectors of lustful lies. Poetry came to be denounced as mother of abuse “immoral, debilitating, lying and provocative of debauchery” (David Daiches 50). Stephen Gosson in his *School of Abuse* (1579) dedicated to Master Philip Sidney, associated poets with pipers, jesters and caterpillars. Thus England in early sixteenth century had turned a relentless stepmother to poetry, and Sidney was countered with a problem how to defend poetry. Treatises like *Do Genealogia Deorum* and *De Audiendis Poetis* were written earlier but these served merely preliminaries. It was Sidney who first of all philosophically propagated that poetry is “the first light giver to ignorance” whose “planet like music” could move more than the trumpet (18). This unforeseen awakening and consciousnesses invoked by Sidney’s concept of ideal creation indeed, earned for the treatise the honour of “an early landmark.” “The essay reflects and telescopes not only the continental criticism of the century but a certain amount of classical Greek and Roman as well” (Wimsatt 169).

**SUBLIME VISIONS**

Sidney’s doctrine of “other nature” is indeed, a brief term but like a small prism it reflects the colours of classical volumes. Platonic idea of divine inspiration, Aristotle’s concept of imitation, and Horation norm of poetry to teach and delight, has been assimilated in a compact way. Sidney’s elaborate presentation of the lofty notion of poetry as pure inspiration, is Platonic in origin. The poet according to Plato is a “light and winged holy thing … simply inspired to utter that which the Muse impels” (qtd. David Daiches 7). Sidney also develops this view. The poet is presented as possessing great passion and lofty heavenly inspiration. He receives and imparts sublime visions. Beauty and truth are combined by him to compose a world of grandeur and divine wisdom. Sidney’s doctrine of poetic creation is colored throughout by Platonic teaching for “the world conjured up by the poet is the world of Ideal that world present in the mind of the Creator that distorted phenomena of Nature and now made manifest by the creative activity of the poet” (Atkins 117). The world created by the poet is not a castle of air but an ideal world embodying apparitions of divine perfection. It is here that Sidney replies Plato in Platonic terms.

Sidney recalls Aristotle’s testimony concerning the concept of imitation, but is not content to follow it blindly. Poet borrows nothing of what is, has been, or shall be, but “what should or should not be” (53). Thus while for Plato the poet’s world is thrice removed from reality, and for Aristotle an imitation of universal element in human life, for Sidney it is an embodiment of ideal reality and therefore, morally better than the real one. Sidney’s concept of “other nature” in this way, is not at much difference with Aristotle though he uses different terms. “Both see in poetry something more than mere fancy or a bare transcript of life; both maintain that it embodies elements of real and permanent value …. And in this way both discern in poetry truth of the highest that is, of an ideal or universal kind, and this provides a vindication of poetry against the attacks of barking critics” (Atkins 118).

The distinguished glory of poetry lies in the fact that it is the only art that does not imitate but creates. Romans called poets Vates and Greeks as Poiein for poet is the prophet, diviner, foresee maker and creator of a new universe. It is this inventive vigor of poetic faculty; this power of making or creating that distinguishes poet from all practitioners of other branches of learning. Sidney emphasized that astronomer looks upon the stars and sets down what order nature has taken therein. The musician and the moral philosopher stand upon natural virtues, vices and passions of man. The lawyer says what men have determined; the historian what men have done. The grammarian speaks only of the rules of speech. The
physician weighs the nature of man’s body, but the poet never confining himself to any such subjection, invents a ‘new nature’, a ‘second world’ inhabited by heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras and furies. What he provides is not a copy or representation of facts but a transmutation, a refinement of real and rugged world. Ranging freely “within the Zodiac of his wit” (24), he is capable enough to present not only lovelier pictures of natural scenes and objects but also perfect models of love, friendship, heroism, statesmanship and other excellencies in living and concrete forms. “For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest time” (Shelley 228).

The poet as creator of “other nature” employs the instrument of imagination. The process of invention follows not the logic of reasoning and argument but of experience and imagination and introduces events and characters which seem improbable and supernatural in real life. An “imaginative ground plot of a profitable invention” (53) sounds the very basis of poetic creation. However, in emphasizing sovereignty of imagination, Sidney comes closer to Romantic poets. Imagination indeed, is a power of perception, a faculty of synthesis that by joining the world of sense to the divine reality of Plato, creates an ideal world. Man as explained Shelley in A Defence of Poetry, is an Aeolian lyre. The external and internal impressions like the alternations of an ever-changing wind, move it to an ever-changing melody. The principle of imagination gives a concrete shape to impalpable abstractions. The poet taking a flight on “viewless wings of poesy” (Keats 375) lives among soaring ideas. Imagination thus, goes hand in hand with functioning of creation of “other nature.” The formless currents of visions are fashioned, framed and displayed by the power of imagination, and it is crucial to Sidney’s poet in his creation of “other nature.”

The nature created by the poet reveals itself in various forms. The Pastoral, Elegiac, Iambic, Satirical, Comic, Tragic, Epical and lyrical forms, are the various gates through which one enters into the “golden world.” The pastoral form of “other nature” deals with the life of shepherds and peasants, wolves and sheep, and draws attention towards the poverty-stricken life of the poor down-troddens. But as the nature of poetic world aims to instruct as much as to delight, the pastoral poetry is not devoid of the virtues of fortitude and forbearance, simplicity and purity of mind, and other blessings from the lowly life of simple men. The Elegiac form bewailing the sad lot of a wretched man, moves the heart with pity and compassion. Iambic form of poetry denounces the villainy and wickedness springing from the lower instincts of human mind. Satirical form of “other nature” mirrors human follies and indirectly provokes the reader to rise above such weaknesses. Comedy, another species of nature created by the poet, imitates the common errors of human life in a ridiculous manner. By giving a concrete form to gross weaknesses, it aims at correction of them. Tragedy, the most serious and philosophical form of “other nature” awakens us to the uncertainty of human existence and the worthlessness of pomp and power. “It openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissues; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors; that with stirring the effects of admiration and commiseration teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations golden roofs are builded”(45). The nature created in the form of tragedy thus, plays an important role in civilizing and elevating moral stamina of man. The epic poetry clothing noblest actions and magnanimity of characters in the most refined human forms, is best calculated to cause an uplifting effect. The lyric form with well-accorded music praises the reward of virtue and good actions. By singing the lauds of Almighty God, it infuses moral and spiritual instructiveness in the world of poetry created by poet. Thus the “other nature” created by poet speaks through various forms and each form lifts “mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence” (28).

HUMANIZING CREED

The world created by the poet is most pleasant and more persuasive in its appeal than other branches of learning.
Santosh Kumari

The world of philosophy for instance, is so tedious and so misty that only the matured and learned can understand it. Arguments of abstract philosophy provide precepts of general validity through analysis and definitions, divisions and distinctions. The nature of philosophy is dry and rugged devoid of all emotional appeal. The world of history on the other hand, is governed by the laws of treacherous fate and tricky activities. Virtuous suffer unmerited pangs of misery while wicked being triumphant and happy, enjoy luxury, power and prosperity. The ‘mouse-eaten’ medley of empirical history in this way, is confined to the imperfect and unjust laws. Moreover, the persons in history being real men and women are not immune to inhumanity and baseness. The nature of history in this way is tied down to “Kathekonta,” the particular while the nature of poetry is licensed to deal with “Katholou” that is with the universal consideration. Moreover, the persons in history being a mixture of goodness and wickedness can not move the reader to imitate them. The nature created by the poet on the other hand, is commanded by the better laws of poetic justice. “The true nature of virtue is painted vividly and attractively while vice with equal vividness is made to appear always ugly and unattractive” (David Daiches 64). ‘The second nature’ created by him as said by Aristotle is “Philosopheterin and Spoudaioteron” that is more philosophical and more studiously serious than history (35). It is more persuasive and more intelligible, and both history and philosophy “entered into the gates of popular judgment” after receiving “a great passport of poetry” (20). Sidney’s concept of “other nature” emphasizes the need of moral and spiritual instructiveness in literature. The evaluation of art lies not merely in adding knowledge and giving delight, but in imparting elevating influence.

Oh! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud enveloping the earth;
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice (Coleridge 219).

Aesthetic delight yielded by art is subservient to the communication of humanism, truthfulness, courage and courtesy. Accordingly “other nature” created by the poet does not offer a world of escape but stimulates the reader to imitate what is virtuous and righteous. As Aristotle felt the fruit of learning lies not mere in knowing but in doing, the nature created by poet enriches memory, purifies wit, invigorates judgment, and elevates human soul above all. The world of poetry gives us insight not into reality “but an alternative to reality, the alternative being in every way superior …. The poet does not imitate but creates: it is the reader who imitates what the poet creates” (David Daiches 58-59). The nature of the poetic world is so sweet in prospect that even the evil minds are enticed to enter into it. Its divine cultural force civilizes the uncivilized barbarians. The creation of a single hero embodies so many human virtues that the reader is awakened to an ambition of becoming like him. “The images of virtue are no more moralitas, no powder hidden under Jam. They are the final sweetness of that sweet world, the form of goodness, which seen we can not but love” (Lewis 346).

Although Sidney’s concept of “other nature” did not introduce an absolutely novel process of poetry, yet it never failed to cast its shadow on the writers of coming centuries. “The importance of this manifesto both symptomatically and typically can hardly be exaggerated. It exhibits the temper of the generation which actually produced the first fruits of the greatest Elizabethan poetry; it served as a stimulant and encouragement to all the successive generations of the great age” (Saintsbury 57). The “other nature” created by Spenser in Faerie Queene for instance, does not aim to amuse only but persuades men to righteousness and uplifts mind to eulogizing virtues. It is highly serious and humanizing in creed and preaches holiness, temperance, chastity, justice, friendship, courtesy – all equally important in making up all inclusive virtue of magnificence. Poetry to Spenser as to Sidney, is “a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both” (Spenser 655). Milton influenced by Sidney, believed that poetry was to teach the laws of...
God, and infuse a harmonious equilibrium of desire and intelligence, passion and reason. Shelley's emphasis on the role of poet as "poiein" is again reminiscent of Sidney's concept. The poet is haunted by the images of perfection and "the province of the poet is to arrest these apparitions, to veil them in language, to colour every other form he touches with their evanescent hues, and so to redeem from decay the visitations of the divinity in man" (Bradley 154). The nature created by the poet to Shelley as to Sidney, is highly infinite and highly potential. The poet to Emerson having close parallels with Sidney's creator of "other nature," remains engaged in conversation with nature and in communicating his experience to the common men, explores manifold meanings in substantial nature and draws towards newer worlds. He is the "complete" and "Eternal man," a "true Land Lord ! Sea Lord ! Air Lord" (Emerson 73). Naturally, the birth of such a creator of new nature to Wmerson, Shelley, Sidney and the entire human race is an important event in history.

CONCLUSIONS

This is how Sidney's concept of "other nature" restored poetry to the platform of a highly creative, serious and fruitful discipline. However, Sidney's concept seems over-emphasizing and over-philosophizing the role of poet in human community. The doctrine seems more theoretical than practical and suffers from a sentimental approach. For how many Miltons, Spensers and the creators of "golden world" are born in the world. Most of the artists especially today write professionally and mechanically than dedicated to the mission of moral upliftment. But as Sidney was answering to Gosson's vehement charges against poetry; he was writing to raise poetry to its ancient prestige from the level of a "laughing stock" (18), and therefore the excessive idealism of his approach may be ignored. We can't help in believing with Atkins that he "flashed a new light over the whole field, dispelling the mists which had gathered around poetry during the preceding centuries" (125). Sidney's concept is not a commentary of directions to authors like that of Pope's Essay on Criticism, it is an honest attempt to set forth what the spirit of poetry is. The basic idea of "other nature" is no doubt a borrowed one but it has been intermingled with Sidney's own ideas so beautifully that the concept seems most original. Sidney treads the familiar poetic ground but a whiff of freshness, a deviation from the hackneyed tradition, is evident to any thoughtful mind.

REFERENCES


