

Western Aesthetics in Sri Aurobindo's Criticism

Dr. K. Ujjwala

Associate Prof of English
K. L. University, Vijayawada
Andhra Pradesh, India

The western aesthetics was developed in ancient Greece in relation to drama and transposed to other literary categories. This is the earliest or Hellenic phase of criticism which was soon followed by Graeco-Roman phase. The poetic mind of Greece and Rome has pervaded and largely shaped the whole artistic production of Europe; Italian poetry of the great age has thrown on some part of it at least a stamp only less profound; French prose and poetry – but the latter in a much less degree – have helped more than any other literary influence to the modern turn of the European mind and its mode of expression. According to Sri Aurobindo, “The poetic literature in Greek started with poetry of Homer, Latin with the historical epic of Ennius, French with the feudal romances of the Charlemagne cycle and the Arthurian cycle. But in none of these was the artistic aim simply the observant accurate presentation of Greek or Roman or feudal life”¹

With the Renaissance which was ushered in by the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, and the consequent western movement of – literary masterpiece of antiquity, one witnesses an unprecedented spurt of literary and critical activity. The modern English poetry began to be written after the fusion of various races had taken place on English soil and an Anglo-Celtic national temperament had been evolved in addition to revealing lovingly that poetry and art have also their part to play and English poetry has followed successive steps of national ascending order of developing perceptions and consciousness. According to Sri Aurobindo, “The English creative genius began by a quite external, a clear superficial substance and utterance. It proceeded to deeper vital poetry, a poetry of the power and beauty and wonder and spontaneous thought, the joy and passion and pain, the colour and music of life, in which the external presentation of life and things was taken, but heightened, exceeded and given its full dynamic imaginative content.”²

The early motive and style of Chaucer's poetry is a direct and concrete observation of ordinary human life and character. He has his eye fixed on the object, and that object is the visible action of life as it passes before him throwing its figures on his mind and stirring it to kindly satisfaction in the movement and its interest a blithe sense of humour or a light and easy pathos. According to Sri Aurobindo, “He neither concerned to look at all into the souls deeply, into the minds of the men and whose appearance, action and easily apparent traits of character he describes with so apt and observant a fidelity nor moved to interpret life; a clear and happy presentation is his business.”³

The Renaissance brings in a sense of liberation from the burden and the obligation; it looks at life and loves it in excess; it is carried away by the beauty of the body and the sense and the intellect, the beauty of sensation and action and speech and thought but of thought hardly at all for its own sake, but thought as a power of life. The Elizabethan age is the era of the most opulent output in the long history of English poetic genius and Elizabethan poetry is an expression of this energy, passion and wonder of life, and is much more powerful for it has neither a past traditional culture nor an innate taste to restrain its extravagances. Shakespeare stands out alone both in his age and in all English Literature as the one great and genuine

dramatic poet and stands out too as quite unique in his spirit, method and quality. He has given a wonderful language to poetic thought, yet does not think for the sake of life. According to Sri Aurobindo, "Homer makes beauty out of man's outward life and action and stops there. Shakespeare rises one step further and reveals a life-soul and life-forces and life-values to which Homer has no access. In Valmiki and Vyas there is the constant presence of great idea-forces and ideals supporting life and its movements which were beyond the scope of Homer and Shakespeare."⁴

A poet like Shakespeare without spiritual experience may in an inspired moment become the medium of an expression, as it is not of his own mind, may be very powerful and living, not merely aesthetically agreeable. According to Sri Aurobindo, "Shakespeare has overhead touch in his substance, the rhythm and the feeling but he does not give us the sense of one and the Infinite."⁵

The result of Elizabethan era is great but there are other powers of all human consciousness which have not yet been mastered and to get these is the next immediate step of English poetry. According to Sri Aurobindo, "In Elizabethan poetry the physical and external tendency still persists but it is no longer sufficient to satisfy either the perceiving spirit or its creative force. Life is still the muse of this poetry; but it is a life which demands to feel itself more and is already knocking or trying to knock at the gates of the deeper subjective being."⁶

English poetry turned to an attempt at mastering the secret of Latins, the secret of a clear, measured and intellectual dealing with life, things and ideas. The age set out with a promise of better things; for a time it seemed almost on the right path. Milton occupies his high rank among the poets by his epic poem *Paradise Lost* in the world's literature. The poem compels admiration through out by its greatness of style and rhythm, but as a whole in spite of its mighty opening 'Of man's first obedience, and fruit', its whole substance fails to enter victoriously either into the mind or into the heart of the world. According to Sri Aurobindo, "There is nothing of the Higher Mind knowledge or vision either in the style or substance. But there is often a largeness of rhythm and sweep of language in Milton which has a certain kinship to the manner natural to a higher supra-intellectual vision, and something from the substance of planes of spiritual seeing can come into this poetry whose medium is the poetic intelligence and uplift it."⁷

The psychological development of English poetry, its place, its value is mostly in the direction of sheer intellectuality concerned with the more superficial aspects of thought and life deliberately barren of emotion except the more superficial; lyricism has run dry, beauty has become artificial where at all it survives, passion is replaced by rhetoric, the heart is silent, life has civilized, urbanized, socialized itself too much to have any more a very living contact with nature. Then came an attempt, a brilliant and beautiful attempts to get through nature and thought and the veiled mind in life and nature and its profounder aesthetic suggestions to some large and deep spiritual truth behind these things. According to Viswanath Chatterjee, "Classicism prides itself on knowledge, romanticism longs for wisdom. Naturally, in the former, the emphasis is on intellect, and, in the latter, the emphasis is on feeling. Classicism deifies reason, in romanticism there is the apotheosis of imagination. It is no wonder that romanticism is so often anti-intellectual."⁸

The poetry of the time is called romantic poetry which has great voices who fall naturally in spite of their pronounced differences into pairs- Wordsworth and Byron, Blake and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Byron started the language and movement which were an intellectual and sentimental rhetoric, the speech of 18th century broken down, melted and beaten

into new shape for stronger uses. Byron expressed the fervent mind of humanity to shake off the convention of the past struggle towards a direct feeling of itself and surrounding world in their immediate reality. According to Sri Aurobindo, "Byron did a considered work of secondary kind but he had something greater to say which he never said, but only gave rare hints of it and an obscured sense of its meaning. He sets out with a strangely transformed echo of the past intellectualism, is carried beyond it by the elemental force of his personality, has even one foot across the borders of the spiritual but never quite enters into that kingdom."⁹

Wordsworth is the most outstanding visionary with a much higher poetic mind than Byron's who did not entirely miss his greatest way though he wandered much in adjacent paths and finally lost himself in the dry desert sound of the uninspired intellectual mentality. Wordsworth saw nature and he saw man near to nature and when he speaks of these things he finds his noblest or purest and the most penetrating tones and his views of them is native to his temperament and personality at the opposite pole to Byron's. According to Sri Aurobindo, "All depends on the power of expression of poet. A poet like Wordsworth though without spiritual experience may in an inspired moment become the medium of an expression, as it is not that of his own mind, may be very powerful and living merely aesthetically agreeable."¹⁰

Wordsworth and Byron in the deepest centre of their inspiration are moved by powers but they failed by an excess of the alloy of untransmuted intellect in their work. The other two poets of the time Blake and Coleridge open magical gates and their voices come ringing with an unearthly melody. Blake's power of expression is akin in its strangeness to his eye of vision. His speech like his seeing has singular other-world clarity and sheerness of expression in it, the light of supernature. According to Sri Aurobindo, "When he prophetises as in some of his more ambitious efforts, he mentalises too much the mystic and missed the marvel and the magic."¹¹

S.T. Coleridge was a more a philosopher than a mystic. He attempted to synthesize poetry and philosophy. Intellectuality he had in abundance, a wide, rich and subtle intellect, but he squandered rather than used it in discursive Metaphysics and criticism. The poet in him never took into himself the thinker and the greater part of his poetry, though his whole production is small enough in bulk, is unconvincing in the extreme. According to Sri Aurobindo, "It has some intellectual finish but not either force or magic, or a fluidity of movement which fails to hold the ear."¹²

Shelley and Keats are perhaps the two most purely poetic minds than almost any of these that have used the English tongue with certain antimony. Shelley sings from the skies earthwards and Keats looks from earth towards Olympus. Keats loved the principle of beauty in all things. He saw the image of divine beauty in three of the four forms, sensuous beauty, and imaginative beauty, intellectual beauty and ideal beauty. But it is the first only which he had entirely expressed; the second he had carried for, but it was not yet full-orbed; towards the third and the highest he was only striving to philosophize he dared not yet but it was from the first real sense and goal of his genius. According to Sri Aurobindo, "In him the spiritual seeking stops abruptly short and prepares to fall away down a rich sensuous incline to a subsequent poetry which turns from it to seek poetic truth a pleasure through the senses and an artistic or curiously observing or finely psychologising intellectualism"¹³

A greater poet by nature than almost any of these is Shelley who is a sovereign voice of the new spiritual realities much more rationally near to them than Wordsworth has, what Coleridge had not, a poetic grasp of metaphysical truths. In Shelley it is not so much what is said but what is not said that is important. The spiritual truth which had

possession of Shelley's mind was higher than any thing opened to the vision of any contemporaries, and its power and reality which was the essence of his inspiration can only be grasped, when it is known and lived, by a changed and future humanity. Shelley is not a spiritual poet, what he did get was something of the purest emotional or aesthetic feeling a purest subtle mind- a touch of an essence behind the appearance, an essence of ideal light, truth or beauty. According to Nolini Kanta Gupta, "Both Shelley and Aurobindo were alike in their depth of knowledge and drew their inspiration from similar sources. Though Shelley follows Coleridge in emphasizing the function of imagination, he interprets it in the light of Sri Aurobindonian idealism."¹⁴

The attempt of romantic poets did not come to perfect fruition; it stopped shortly because there had not been the right intellectual preparation or a sufficient of spiritual knowledge and experience. The next era is the Victorian period which has been unimaginative artistic intellectualism touched with the greater and fresh breath of modern thought and its wide interest and fullness of matter opened up to some mountain – top prospects, struck across by some moments of prophecy. Tennyson is the most representative and successful poet of the Victorian epoch. He gives a good deal of thinking of a kind in often admirably telling phrase and with much art of setting, but he is not a revealing poetic thinker. According to Sri Aurobindo, "The poet has no meditative, no emotional or impassioned, no close or revealing grasp on life, and on the other hand no deep interpretative idea and without one or other of these things narrative poetry of the modern kind cannot succeed; it becomes a body without soul or life-breath."¹⁵

Among the Victorians Browning stands next to Tennyson in the importance of his poetic work and station as representative figure of the age and creator. He is a student critic; psychologist and thinker who seeks to interpret like certain French poets, the civilizations and the ages. The two loves – human and divine love – that weave the mingled yarn of Browning's poetry. Power was there and the hold of his material; what was absent was the essential faculty of artistic form and poetic beauty. According to Sri Aurobindo, "This great creator was no artist; this strength was too robust and direct to give forth sweetness. Most strong forceful work he did of a great and robust substance won many victories, but the supreme greatness cannot come in poetry without the supreme beauty."¹⁶

The movement away from the Victorian type is recent and contemporary English poetry. It is a period of transition not yet a new age, but the preparation for a new age of humanity. The poets of yesterday and today, Whitman, Carpenter; the Irish poets, and the Italian poet Tagore are the forerunners of the new spirit and way of seeing. This is the age of the intuitive mind breaking into dawn in the poetry of these poets. Whitman is a great poet, one of the greatest in the power of his substance, the energy of his vision, the force of his style. He is the spiritual crowned athlete and vital prophet of democracy, liberty and the soul of man and nature and all humanity whose aim is consciently, clearly, professedly to make a great revolution in the whole method of poetry with his energy and diction. According to Sri Aurobindo, "What he has not, is the unfailing poetic beauty and nobility which saves greatness from its defects – supreme gift of Homer and Valmiki – and the self-restraint and obedience to a divine law which makes even the Gods more divine."¹⁷

Carpenter has a power of substance, thought-vision, image, expression which is very rare in all these respects he would have been recognized as not only equal but superior to many who have enjoyed in their own day the reputation of poets of the first rank. According to

Sri Aurobindo, “He is not so recognized is due to the inferior form, a form, legitimate enough for lesser uses, but not easily capable of the greatest poetic effects.”¹⁸

Yeats is a supreme artist in rhythm and his spiritual intonation is the very secret of all his subtlest melodies and harmonies while AE is not a great rhythmist but he is preoccupied with his vision, more of a truth-seer than a truth-hearer of the spirit. According to Sri Aurobindo, “What Yeats expressed, he expressed with great poetical beauty, perfection and power and he has, besides a creative imagination while AE had an unequal profundity of vision and power and range in the spiritual and psychic field.”¹⁹

The English mind is apt to look on poetry by an Indian as a curiosity, something exotic and to stress the distance at which the English temperament stands from the Indian temperament. But Tagore’s *Gitanjali* is most un-English, yet it overcame this obstacle for the poetry of spiritual experience even if it has true poetic value, the difficulty might lie in the remoteness of the subject. According to Srinivas, K. Iyengar, “The *Gitanjali* songs are mainly poems of Bhakti in the great Indian tradition.”²⁰

Western aesthetics has done great things but has neither exhausted its great natural vigour nor fixed itself in any dominant tradition but rather has constantly shown a free spirit of poetical advance. Western aesthetics is powerful but it is imperfect, strong in spirit, but uncertain and tentative in form; it is extraordinarily stimulating, not often quite satisfying. It aims high, but its success is not as great as its effort. According to Sri Aurobindo, “It has had no great self-recognizing idea or view of life expressive of the spiritual attitude of the nation or powerful to determine from an early time its own sufficient artistic forms. But it is precisely the possession of such self-recognizing spiritual attitude and the attainment of a satisfying artistic form for it which make the poetry of a nation a power in the world’s greatest culture.”²¹

The modernists have not successfully achieved the possibility of a real advance – an attempt to get away from ornate mental constructions about things to the expressions of the intimate truth of things themselves as directly seen by a deeper insight within us. This aim can be achieved by only one kind of technique i.e. overhead poetry. According to Sri Aurobindo, “This poetry will be the voice of eternal things raising to a new significance and to a great satisfied joy in experience the events and emotions and transiencies of life. This poetry will speak of new things and of old things in a new way and with a new voice not by any exclusion or diminution of its province, but by a great heightening above, a great intimacy with, a great enlargement and wideness around, a vision of inmost things and therefore a changed vision of the world and life and the untold potentialities of the soul’s experience.”²²

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