



What is Poetry?

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ABSTRACT

It is an interesting thing that all of us write poetry but most of us do not know how to define it comprehensively and satisfactorily. As Prof G. Basappa observes, when St. Augustine was asked to define poetry, he simply evaded to define it by saying, "if not asked I know, if you ask me I know not." (p. 16) Yet, some working definition is necessary for understanding the nature of poetry, its composition and function.

KEYWORDS : Poetry, Poet, Imaginative and Emotional elements, Truth

Definitions of Poetry:

Prof. G. Basappa-the author of *"Literary Criticism: Criticism-Prosody and History of the Language"*-mentions the great writers of English Literature on the definition of poetry.

Dr. Samuel Johnson defines, "Poetry is a metrical composition; it is the art of uniting pleasure with truth by calling imagination to the help of reason; its essence is invention." (Basappa, p. 16) According to Carlyle, "Poetry is nothing but musical thought." (p. 16) Macaulay means by poetry "The art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination, the art of doing by means of words what a painter does by means of colors." (p. 16) Wordsworth defines poetry "as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." (p. 16) As Prof. G. Basappa notices Prof. Courthope's definition of poetry, "Poetry is the art of producing pleasure by the just expression of imaginative thought and feeling in metrical language." (p. 16) According to Mathew Arnold, "Poetry is simply the most delightful and perfect form of utterance that human words can reach; it is a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." (p. 16)

Milton, as Prof. G. Basappa writes in his *"Literary Criticism: Criticism-Prosody and History of the Language,"* wrote poetry with a view to gain fame and immortality and to produce something precious which posterity would not willing let die. His poetry aimed at asserting eternal providence and justifying the ways of God to man (p. 17).

It is precise that the definitions are of little help, either considered separately or in combination, in knowing the nature of poetry. As the subject is approached from different points of view, it presents a confusing variety in its nature (p. 17). Prof. G. Basappa:

"On the whole the definitions have taken the readers away from the concrete world of reality. Therefore, a fair knowledge of the characteristics of poetry that are constant and universal in nature is necessary." (p. 17)

What constitutes poetry?

Poetry consists of emotional and imaginative elements (p. 17). Therefore, poetical interpretation of life means an interpretation or criticism of its facts, experiences and problems through imaginative and emotional approach. Imaginative and emotional elements are the vital but not the sole elements that constitute poetry (p. 17). As Prof. G. Basappa points out,

"Often poetic prose too consists of these important qualities. A composition to be called poetry must necessarily have imaginative and emotional expression as poetry is a special kind of art." (p. 17)

It has a kind of form characterized by rhythmical language or regular measure. Therefore, all these vital aspects go to constitute poetry. The imaginative and emotional qualities serve as the spirit and the form serves as the structure of poetry.

Prose and Poetry

As Prof. G. Basappa observes,

"The writings of Addison, Carlyle and Lamb almost run like poetry although they are in prose. Carlyle himself distinguishes poetry from prose in so far as the former happens to be metrical thought. Even the great poet Mathew Arnold, who held that poetry is the criticism of life, believes that the rhythm and metre of poetry elevated to a regularity, certainty and force very different from that of the rhythm and measure are the characteristic qualities essential to poetry." (p. 18)

Yet, the whole thing appears paradoxical. Carlyle's 'Sartar Resartus' although written in prose runs like fine poetry (p. 18). There are certain solemn novels in prose narrative which are almost prosaic. The Psalms and the Bible, according to Prof. G. Basappa, are exceptionally poetical in form. There are certain other compositions such Macpherson's 'Ossian', the rhapsodies of William Blake, Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' etc. (p. 19). Therefore, it is very difficult to draw a line of demarcation between prose that is poetic and poetry.

Poet, Poetry and Truth

The poet, according to Prof. G. Basappa, gives us a sense of intimacy with things which he portrays and sets up a relationship with them through imagination and emotion (p. 21). Further, Prof. G. Basappa says, "Accuracy and vividness in portrayal of such things are the vital principle of any great poetry. When the imaginative handling of natural fact is unreal, the poetry fails to appeal and can no longer great. The basis of reality is the criterion of good poetry." (p. 21)

Poet is a philosopher but philosopher is not be a poet. He has the duty, not only to instruct but also to activate the imagination and touch the chord of emotion. Prof. G. Basappa:

"If the aim is only to arouse fancy, teachings will become unreal, and similarly when the aim is instruction, the occasion for a bit of pleasing fancy will not be appropriate. When poetic truth is the thing, poetry should aim at it." (p. 22)

Further, Poetic truth, "is not a mixture of fancy and truth; it is truth in purity; it is an essential attribute of sanity; but it differs from scientific truth and yet is a complement to it." (p. 22)

However, what Mr. Shairp explains is found precisely in Prof. G. Basappa's *"Literary Criticism: Criticism-Prosody and History of the Language,"* that

"There is no truth cognisable by man which may not shape itself into poetry. It matters not whether it be a vision of nature's on-goings, or a conception of the affections, or some moral sentiment, or some glimpse of the spiritual world. Any one of these may be so realized as to become fit subject for poetic utterance. Only in order that it should cease to be a merely sensible object, or a mere notion of the understanding, and pass inward, pass out of the coldness of the merely notional region into the warm atmosphere of the life-giving imagination.

Vitalized there, the truth shapes itself into living images which kindle the passion and affections, and stimulate the whole man. This is what has been called the real apprehension of truths as opposed to the merely notional assent to them." (pp. 22-23)

So, it is clear, from this, that the poetic truth has human significance.

What does poetry do?

It is an all time question "What does poetry do?" To this, we find lots of answers from different critics. However, Prof. G. Basappa says,

"Poetry makes us see sensuous beauties and find spiritual meaning in the worlds of human experience and of nature. Every man is gifted in some measure with the vision of beautiful and faculty divine." (p. 23)

However, it is a poet differs from a common man in that. He has an exceptional capacity to see and feel sensuous beauty, and he has an exceptional power to express and interpret life and things in the readers. Thus, the important trait of poetry is the revelation of beauty and mystery and the awakening of sympathetic response in readers (p. 23).

As an interpretation of life, poetry's greatness depends on the intensity with which it handles life's greatest problems (p. 23). Treating poetry as fine arts, Prof. G. Basappa says,

"As a fine art it justifies its rank not merely by its artistic value but also by the spirit, thought and feeling in embodies. Its pleasure-giving virtue does depend on the subject-matter it handles and the manner of handling it." (p. 23)

Life and poetry are intimately related because each derives its inspiration from the other. Prof G. Basappa: "Life gives content to poetry, finds expression through poetry and gets inspired by poetry." Also, he says,

"A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life."

The answer to "What does poetry do?" also lies in the hand of a poet. This means, it is to the poet's capacity to handle the themes and justify the poetry. Even more, the personality of the poet and his outlook upon life and nature are as important as any other content of real poetry (p. 24). This can be another reason to show that poetry is related to life.

Conclusion:

On the basis of how a poet deals with himself and his surroundings, poetry can divided into many divisions. However, at the end of the day, poetry, as Mathew Arnold holds, is simply the most delightful and perfect form of utterance that human words can reach; it is a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. The chief virtue of poetry is that whatever it touches in life, it relates to our feelings and passions; while at the same time by the exercise of the poetic imaginative power, it both transfigures the existing realities and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name (p. 29).

REFERENCES

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