

Concept of Art and Poetry

What is the fundamental mission of poetry? This should be a burning question in the mind of every poet who takes his pen at all seriously, and in accord with his answer to it we, who mould his work, judge him. The answer to the question varies necessarily with the varying personalities and temperament of individual poets and with their outlook on life. Wordsworth, a grave and somewhat humourless teacher of men, is ever occupied with the moral truth that lies behind and beyond the material things of life and as a result his poetry quite frequently deteriorates into that dull and laboured didacticism which has made him so unpalatable to many readers. Arnold proclaims the necessity of what he styles 'high seriousness', in all truly great art, but that 'high seriousness' can be of course, defined in diverse ways. However, Arnold himself, means by it something akin to moral note, if not the moral note itself. Keats with his conviction that 'Beauty is truth and truth and truth beauty' confines himself pretty much to a perception and relation. Stevenson's work, prose and poetry is, full of the 'love of lovely words' and of all the artistic technique which that involved. Thus we can continue indefinitely discriminating between poets according to their individual conceptions of the mission of art, showing, too, how their conceptions have determined and shaped all they have written.

Varied indeed are the answers to one question and countless in number but in vain it will be admitted that they can be divided into three large classes – (1) The class composed of poets whose work is consciously moral, the class of didactic poets as one might say. (2) The class composed of poets, who adopting the first part of Keats creed, 'Beauty is truth' agree that art should not exist for a moral purpose so much as primarily for its own sake. It is natural at this point, perhaps, to be reminded of Newman's contention regarding the true purpose of education contained in the 'Idea of a University', namely that knowledge is its own end and to be pursued primarily for an ulterior or utilitarian purpose, for the positions of such poets as I am now describing and of Newman are decidedly analogies. If this be, indeed, the end of knowledge, can it equally rationally be contended that art too should be followed and created for its own sake rather than with a definite pulpit or semi-pulpit purpose. (3) The larger class of poets who while consciously moralising, do not draw any such sharp distinction between Beauty and Truth and Virtue, but regard them all as essential, no true poetry of the highest class being possible which is not blending of them all.

Now of these three classes so defined, it is to the second that our attention is drawn. Morality consists in obeying certain rules of human conduct, which have been made by men no doubt, but there is an idea that "behind them lies the

deeper judgement of God". This religious element supplies the greatest incentive to respect moral consideration". But men often confuse morality with religion. Those rules of human conduct are not mutable. They are different in different countries. They change with the change of environments. Even among the people professing the same religion moral considerations differ. This is due to the difference in social customs which have nothing to do with God or heaven. But there are certain moral ideas which do not change with time and place.

It seems therefore clear that art and morality, aestheticism and ethicism have different spheres, and have no connection whatsoever. This line of thinking has given birth to a school of thought which holds that art is for the sake of art and it has nothing to do with morality. If moral considerations sway the mind of an artist, his creative genius would be chained and it would have its free play without which no great care can blossom. Art expresses, that is all; even if there be any indecent thought it must express it, otherwise it would be guilty of hypocrisy.

They value art for the aesthetic value it yields. Johnson and Shelley are in favour of Art for Art's sake. They argue that the sole object of art is to please us by its aesthetic experience. They are aware of no connection between that experience and human conduct. If a work of art is good to them, its goodness is not moral but simply aesthetic, something perceived immediately and valued for its own sake without its relation to any kind of conduct. If they lament the loss of a book or a poem, it is because of inherent qualities that are in the poem. It is because they have lost the poem itself. But if we, as may happen, do learn something from a work of art, that is by accident it is not the reason of valuing it, nor in fact are we disappointed if we learn something from a book of art, for the function of art for such critics is not to reach dull formulae. It is only an after-thought that we connect our experience with our future at all.

Swinburne and Keats believe in the sensuous experience of art. Keat's exclamation: "Oh, for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts" prove the thesis, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration rather obliterates all other consideration, which tend to show his attitude towards his art. He worshipped beauty for the sake of beauty. Oscar Wilde like Swinburne too had no utilitarian view of art and battles against didacticism in letters, even going so far as to condemn the novels of Dickens and Charles Reade, because they are novels with a purpose. For him as for Swinburne art existed for its own sake. Its prime function was not to teach but to reveal the beautiful.

For Oscar Wilde "Art is life itself". These champions ask if man is more animal than rational, why should they express life depicting him more divine. In ancient Greek and Hindu arts such things were allowed. There are statues and paintings

of naked women, in poses which a gentleman can hardly look at, but these pass off in polished society, as good specimen of Greek sculpture and painting.

This school of thought in literature gives the pictures of abnormal sex life and supports them as an example of realistic life. Little do these advocates think of the effects that are likely to be produced on the health of society. Indecent pictures, ugly literature, immoral songs which show only the animal side of man and take no account of the divine aspect of him as strut on the stage of the art world as realistic art. Art is neither moral, nor immoral, but a thing on which moral considerations should not be applied at all, and may be called 'amoral'.

There is another class of artists who hold just the opposite view. All human activities and art are not exception to that it must be guided and controlled by moral law. No man can do anything which is calculated to undermine the health of society. If he does so, the public opinion must stop him, and those who hold human welfare sacred must punish him. The march of man from barbarism to civilization is a long chapter of suppression of his brutal and vulgar instinct. The animal side of man must not be displayed by anybody so that the animal passion "dormant in man, may awaken". An artist therefore is not free to do whatever he likes. He lives in a society with pictures of obscenity and vulgarity.

Ruskin and other of this school believe in the relation of art and morality. To them a work of art is nothing but a "Sermon in disguise". Art should not be stripped off morality which gives a reality to it. The advocates of art for the sake of morality did not read any significance in aesthetic experience – a mere sensuous perception of beauty. They denounce vociferously the unstrained flights of imagination in art. They argue that art loses its value when it comes to lack morality which is the true criterion of art. To talk in terms of the absolute is useless. It should explain the significance of life with all complications. The more it recedes from this moral aspect, the more useless it becomes. Morality and art should go hand in hand. Ruskin calls that art greatest which "conveys to the mind of the spectator by any means or medium the greatest ideas." The power of giving ideas measures the greatness of art.

These two different themes of art provided two different methods of dealing with life. Art for the sake of art means an escape from life into the new world created by art. On the other hand art for the sake of morality furnishes us with a 'foot hold' to face life with all its temptations and risks. When we are studying the artists of the former class, we are led into 'charmed-magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery land forlorn'. Art for the sake of morality is the soul of art while art for the sake of art is the intellect of art. The critics vibrant with the latter view try to save the intellectual problem of an age while the former one fly from it.

Byron says, "Art is triumph of mind over matter". He again says "While science is subjecting of the mind to matter, art is subjecting of the matter to the mind." If we look into this statement, it is left to us to see which of the two theories discussed above serves the greatest purpose. Art for the sake of art carries the requisite triumph so far as to remove matter altogether outside the picture. The other sticks to it, and struggles to invest it with a glow of harmlessness. Both of them take us out of the darkness into light only, the former light is dazzling while the latter is simply aglow. Thus both the theories console us and they lend solace to those who shelter from misfortune by offering them an interpretation of it.

The artist should neither make a conscious effort at moralising nor should deliberately defy moral principles. The duty of the artist is "creation of joy". But he engages himself in painting picture of ugliness to pander to the approved taste of the vulgar people, and proclaiming to be a work of art, he would be guilty if he suppresses all natural and normal human passions and paints only pictures of divine life. The truth is that a great artist unconsciously becomes a moralist, for "beauty is truth". As for the ordinary artist he should follow the golden mean between the two extremes. "A poetry of revolt against life and a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life".

Now it seems to us that in part at least we can admit Bandelaise and his disciples are right. Without skilful workmanship, no true art can exist. We are reminded of a speech made at a dinner by late Robert Bridges. He was giving a few words of advice to budding and would be poets and writers, and in the course of his talk made the statement that he believed in such literary aspirants letting out with reserve what was in them. A little later, another speaker arose and objected to this view. Too many young men, he asserted, wrote in just that way; and then he emphasized the absolute necessity for more careful workmanship.

If 'art for art' theory can ensure careful workmanship, it has, it seems to us, brought about something very desirable in literature. Mere didacticism is, indeed, never art, it is only when the highest sort of teaching is clothed in the noblest vestment of expression that is really worthwhile. That such vestment is the aim of the advocates of art for art theory is incorrect.

But the great poet must be more than the mere artist; he must be the visionary and the seer, and the teacher in the very highest and truest sense. Morality or high seriousness does not necessarily imply didacticism – there the advocate of the art for art theory commits error no less than Wordsworth but it implies rather a revelation of the eternal and supreme truth of life. A poet does not need to be consciously moralising but his work must have moral values behind it to be everlasting.

It was assuredly this that made Morris write of Swinburne in the following manner. "Time was when poetry resulting merely from this intense study and love of literature might have been, if not the best, yet in any rate, very worthy and enduring, but in these days, when the issue is so momentous and surroundings of life so stern that nothing can take serious hold of people or should do so, but that which is rooted deepest in reality and is quite first hand, there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man because of its innate strength and vision.

Strength and vision are indeed, what 'art for art sake' theorists lacked most, for these qualities come from that moral case which is the basis of all greater literature. The kernel of all great poetry is to be discovered in its moral significance; the shell is the art in which that kernel can be found. The shell, indeed, is necessary if the kernel is to be preserved through passing of years, it must be so formed that it will be durable and adequate, for without it the kernel will decay and be lost. But the shell after all is only a shell. If it will be empty or the kernel be withered and dry, it is of little value. Such is the true relation of technique to ideas or ideals in art.