POETRY: AN EXPRESSION OF SELF

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"The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,

Doth glance from heav'n to earth, from earth to heav'n;

And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen

Turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name.

Such tricks hath strong imagination." (Shakespeare).

Any consideration of the nature of poetry inevitably leads us to a discussion of art, as poetry is one of the art forms. Art is a distinctively human activity; and its distinctiveness lies in the fact of its being an independent and disinterested activity. In spite of the Graeco-Roman identification of art and craft, art proper is not a matter of mere skill and technique, of profit and amusement, of instruction and exhortation. But the independence and disinterestedness of art does not mean its divorce from the totality of human concerns and experiences, it only means that it has no practical and materially utilitarian ends and concerns. Collingwood makes a rather too rigid distinction between art and craft, art proper and magic-art, and amusement art; his distinction will exclude from the category of pure art some of the best art of classical Greece, of medieval Europe, of ancient Egypt. In fact, all art, in all times, has been closely related to some religious, magical, communal or love motive. Art, as an expression of the complex human nature, is a complex activity and includes a variety of human motives, impulses, and experiences. And this activity, as contrasted with craft, does not aim at any preconceived result by means of consciously controlled and

directed action. Artistic activity and process is an internal process, taking place within the self of the artist, and then externalizing and perpetuating itself in a visible form, called the work of art, — a poem, a painting, a statue. But the arts of painting and sculpture, to the extent they make use of means and tools, partake of the nature of craft. The very fact that there are schools of painting and sculpture, proves that these arts can be taught. But poetry is a purer art in that poets cannot be made, they are born. And yet what saves all art from becoming craft is the freedom and disinterestedness of the artistic impulse, — what urges the artist to expression is an inner excitement, restlessness, and compulsion to express the sensuous-emotive-imaginative experience; it is done not at bidding of any outside authority. An artist as artist has no definite and deliberate practical and utilitarian ends in view; but he may certainly have some initially motivating impulse — love of woman, of country, of his children, fear of death, of loneliness, of world's ingratitude and coldness. Without an original impulse and some overmastering emotion related to memory or to the actual present or to the future there can be no work of art; it may be a cry of joy or of despair; it may be a sense of the sweetness and goodness of life, or of its bitterness and evil, it may be a rapture or a pang. The perceptible work of art is art, not in its own right, but only because of the relation in which it stands to what Collingwood calls the "mental" thing or inner experience. "The aesthetic experience," writes Collingwood, "is an autonomous activity. It arises from within; it is not a specific reaction to a stimulus proceeding from a specific type of external object."38 Autonomous, of course, if it means its freedom from extraneous, practical ends; but not in the sense of being free from sense impressions. There could be no "Ode to the Nightingale," "Ode to a Grecian Urn," no "Blessed Damozel," no "Daffodils," if the poets had not received sensuous impressions from the world of beautiful sights and sounds and scents;_ art, in fact, is emotion and imagination added to sensuous experience. But there can also be an intellectual art, born of abstract ideas and feelings, such as a hymn, a song, a lyric, a philosophical poem.

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[38] R.G. Collingwood, The Principles of Art (New York, 1958), p. 40.

Art as pure expression is independent of any audience. A hymn, a song, a lyric, a meditation may just be an effusion of feeling, entirely personal and subjective; lyric and song can be composed even on a lonely island, they may be born of the very sense of loneliness and abandonment in an unfriendly or indifferent universe. "....the expression of emotion," writes Collingwood, "simply as expression, is not addressed to any particular audience."39 But an artist is not an isolated being. Even if living physically in isolation, the artist is linked to the general human consciousness. His experience, however personal and individual, is after all human experience born of his- mental and emotional relations to nature and to man. To repeat again, the "disinterestedness" of art does not exclude personal political, moral, and religious interests and motives, only these interests and motives should be sincere and authentic, and should be expressed completely, vividly, and lucidly. There should be no lie in the soul of a true artist: truthfulness to his own experience and consciousness and vision are the only laws binding upon an artist as artist. "The narrowness or wideness," writes Coning-wood, "of the experience which an artist expresses has nothing to do with the merits of his art."40 Every great work of art arises out of the depths of some intense experience: "We cannot possibly conceal the fact that some of the world's finest love lyrics were originally composed, not in aesthetic freedom, which is independent of all by-purposes, but with the express end of gaining the ear and the favour of a beloved woman."41 Foreign, non-aesthetic motives do not mean want of personal sincere motives; they only mean absence of extraneous considerations of reward or reputation, power or wealth, flattery or fear. To please others has also not been the sole object of any genuine artist.

There is no unanimity with regard to the nature of the artistic impulse and activity. As said before, it is a very complex activity, involving the

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[39] Collingwood, *ibid.,* p. 111.
[40] *Ibid.,* p. 121.
[41] Yrjo Hum, *The Origins of Art,* (London, 1900) p. 9.

instinct of self-expression, self-projection, musing, contemplation, vicarious experience, idealization of the real and the visible. Expression in the artist and vicarious experience in the reader or spectator are inevitable in the creation of art and its impact on another consciousness. Man is never completely satisfied with the everyday mundane and prosaic existence, his soul desires and imagines better and finer forms of existence, — a lovelier loveliness, a happier happiness, a more beautiful beauty; he looks before and after and pines for what is not, and, through memory and imagination, he has relations with the absent and the distant. Historical Beatrices and Lauras become symbols of some imagined beauty and grace, which is never found on earth or sea. Mortal blisses never satisfy man wholly, and therefore:

Nor seeks nor finds he mortal Misses,

But feeds on the aerial kisses

Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.

Aesthetic activity does provide relief to the artist from an indefinable inner restlessness and excitement; after having expressed himself, the artist achieves an inner calm. "The work of art," writes Him, "presents itself as the most effective means by which the individual is enabled to convey to wider and wider circles of sympathisers an emotional state similar to that by which he is himself dominated."[42] Art undoubtedly provides to the artist relief from emotional pressure, and also a projection of his ideal aspirations. Milton's defeated republican ideals found expression in the heroic figure of Satan; and Shelley's ideal hopes and dreams found embodiment in Prometheus and in his other poetic figures. Art does provide imaginative compensation for the deficiencies of life, both to the artist and to the reader or spectator. Reading of a poem, or seeing a painting or a statue, or listening to music, are undeniably pleasant experiences, but the pleasure is imaginative; even imagined sadness has its own pleasure: "enjoyment can be derived by

[42] Him, *ibid.,* p. 85

sentimental reflection on moods of sadness."43 To quote Hirn again: "The delight in witnessing the performance of a tragedy undoubtedly involves the enjoyment of a borrowed pain, which, by unconscious sympathetic imitation, we make partially our own."44

Poetry, as a literary art, is both expression and communication. A poet does not start consciously with the idea of giving information, or amusement, or stimulating any special emotion. But a poem, inevitably, independent of the will and intention of the poet, produces and emotional and imaginative response in the reader. The originating impulse behind a poem may be derived from any aspect. of life-experience: a sight seen, a sound heard, a dream, love or hatred, despair of life, or exultation, joy or grief; and the experience continues its existence by continuing in the imagination of the writer and of the reader. The poetic experience unites what is given by the senses with what is given by the feelings and the imagination of the poet. Description, narration, and reflection all enter into the poetic experience and expression according to the nature of the poem. Poetry can be defined as the imaginative and emotive expression or suggestion or mirroring of that in human life and experience which has universal significance and appcal, in rhythmical and preferably metrical language. It is the expression of impressions received by a sensitive soul through the senses and the imagination. In the words of Hazlitt: "Poetry is the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing, by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it" .45 Shakespeare truly defined the nature of a poet and of poetry when he said that it "gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name." Poetry is not just a literal representation or imitation of life and nature, it is life and nature seen through a temperament and touched by imagination; as Bradley rightly says: "For its nature is to be

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43 *Ibid.,* p. 56.
44 *Ibid.,* p. 59
45 William Hazlitt, *Lectures on English Poets,* p.1.

not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world, but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous."46 In poetry there is more precise, more compressed, and more highly emotive and affective expression and communication, employing images, figures of speech, and rhythmical language. The poetic activity and process can both be spontaneous and unpremeditated, as in a lyric or a song, or it may be laborious as in an epic or drama, depending on the nature of the poem.

The poet, as distinguished from other men who themselves are not poets, is unique in having keener sensibilities, deeper feelings, and a richer imagination, and in having the power of expressing what he sees, feels and thinks, in his ability to express and perpetuate what all feel but which all cannot express in the manner of the poet. The poet, without deliberately aiming at it, awakens awareness in the reader of feelings and experiences lying dormant or sleeping. The poet says, as Alexander Pope rightly said, what all have felt but none so well expressed. A poet's approach and the poetical sense of things is opposed to the matter-of-fact or scientific sense. Science and statistics may concern themselves with facts for the sake of facts, but a poet is concerned with facts and events in so far as they leave on his consciousness sensuous-emotional-imaginative impressions ; the poet connects and unites experiences. To a gardener a flower, a rose or a lily, is a flower, to the botanist a botanical genus, but to the poet it is a thing of beauty and splendour, a mystery, reminding him of so many associations and things beyond itself, which makes the poet call the flower by various unscientific names, such as 'the lady of the garden,' whose daintiness and beauty connects itself in the poet's imagination with some beautiful woman, chaste and white like a lily; daffodils may remind the poet, as they did Herrick and Wordsworth, of the transitoriness of life and beauty, or of a joy and happiness _nrealized by man. The objects and subjects of poet's feelings and thoughts are everywhere scattered in life and nature, within and without, in myth, legend, history, even science and thought, social, economic and

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46 A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry,* (London, 1909), p. 5.

political problems. No subject and object in itself is unpoetical, it is the response of the poet, emotional and imaginative response, which touches every subject with the light and splendour of poetry. A poet is not a preacher, yet he may be passionately inspired, as Shelley was, by the desire to awaken the sleeping earth and change the world, filling it with love, justice and freedom ; he may be possessed by the passion to mould things nearer to the heart's desire.

Poetry his the earliest of literary arts, and was related to music and dance. Early poetry was communal, but with the advance of civilization and the emergence of individual consciousness it became more and more personal and individual, like Keats:

On the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone and think.

Independent of our will and volition every object, whether of nature or of art, — a poem, a painting, a statue — has for us sensuous, emotional, imaginative, or intellectual implications; it does leave upon us some impression, evokes some emotional and imaginative response. And, therefore, irrespective of our wills, the will of the poet and the will of the reader, there is logically inevitable relation and connection between the poet and poetry on the one hand, and the reader and society on the other. This relation necessarily involves the problem of moral relations and evaluations. A poet, during the creative process of expression, obviously has no need of any audience, but when that process results in a poem, the poet, as a human being, cannot be indifferent to the reception of his poem by his friends and by others. When the poet's experience, while being his own personal and authentic experience, is yet so universally true that the reader feels that the poet has not expressed only his own heart's secrets but the secrets of all hearts, the poet and his poem will be considered good and great. What gives interest and value to a poem is the truth and sincerity of the poet's experience and his awareness of life, the depth of his insight, and the power

of expression and communication. Without being a preacher and propagandist, a true poet is not indifferent to the great issues and problems of life; he sees and feels the meanings and significance of things and events and experiences more acutely than others, and has the power of so expressing and interpreting what he sees, feels and thinks as to quicken our own emotions and sympathies and imagination that we see and feel with him. A true and great poet — a Goethe or an Iqbal — cannot be inattentive to all that goes on within and without him. In this very awareness of his and in its full and successful expression lie the artistic value and worth of his poetry.

Poetry, like all art, has a value and significance for the individual, for society, and for civilization which cannot be measured in terms of material profit and power and pleasure; it has a power and glory of its own. Iqbal fully realized the high purpose and vocation of art and poetry when he wrote:

مقصود ہنر سوز حیات ابدی ہے

یہ ایک نفس یا دو نفس مثل شرر کیا

بے معجزہ دنیا میں ابھرتی نہیں قومیں

جو ضرب کلیمی نہیں رکھتا وہ ہنر کیا

(Art's object is the burning for eternal life,

Herein one breath or two like sparks do nothing mean,

Except through miracles nations do not rise in the world:

What is art without the stroke of Moses's staff?)

Again, it was Iqbal who was fully aware of the power of art and poetry, both for good and ill. "The spiritual health of a people," writes Iqbal, "largely depends on the kind of inspiration which their poets and artists receive. But inspiration is not a matter of choice. It is a gift, the character of which cannot be critically judged by the recpient before accepting it. It comes to the individual unsolicited, and only to socialise itself. For this reason the personality that receives and the life-quality of that which is received are matters of the utmost importance for mankind. The inspiration of a single decadent, if his art can lure his fellows to his song or picture, may prove more ruinous to a people than whole battalions of an Attila or a Changez."[47]

Art and poetry have an intrinsic value, their significance lies within themselves, not in any utilitarian end outside them, and this very fact lies at the heart of the difference between art and craft. Poetry has always been a powerful instrument in the development of man's consciousness of himself and of the world, a means of the enrichment and enlargement of his little self, and the means of the recognition and perpetuation of what is enduring and universal in human experience. Poetry raises us above the mundane, the trivial, and the base, and opens up vistas into the "realms of gold", the realms of imagination and feeling, enabling man to see, hear, and think feelingly. Let us conclude with the words of Hazlitt: "Wherever any object takes such a hold of the mind as to make us dwell upon it, and brood over it, melting the heart in tenderness, or kindling it to a sentiment of enthusiasm ; — wherever a movement of imagination or passion is impressed on the mind, by which it seeks to prolong and repeat the emotion, to bring all other objects into accord with it, and to give the same movement of harmony, sustained and continuous, or gradually varied according to the occasion, to the sounds that express it — this is poetry."[48]

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[47] Mohammad Iqbal, "Foreword," to *Muraqqa-i-Chughtai,* (Lahore).
[48] William Hazlitt, Lectures on English Poets, p. 12.