

Essay

WHETHER POETRY IS THE RESULT OF INSPIRATION OR CRAFT



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I feel that one of the most debatable issues in English literature is that whether poetry is the result of inspiration/revelation or it is craft /art. We have sound and strong arguments in support of both the theories i.e., inspiration and craft. Not only sound arguments but it has gone to the extent of belief now, as people believe in either of them and it has taken the place of faith. Prior to address this serious issue whether poetry is the result of inspiration or craft, or has the elements of both, I would like to mention those sound arguments which have been put forth to support the theory they believed in.

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING INSPIRATION:

Plato: Poetry is a product of inspiration rather than reason and therefore it appeals to the heart rather than to the intellect. The poet writes because he is ‘inspired ‘not because he has thought long over a subject.

For the poet is a light winged and holy thing, and there is no inventions in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles. The gift which you possess is not an art but an inspiration; there is divinity moving you. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art but because they are inspired and possessed.

-Plato Ion.

Aristotle: I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential qualities of each, to enquire into the structure of plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same enquiry. Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first.

Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects-the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct.

For as there are persons, who, by conscious art or mere habit, imitate and represent various objects through the medium of color and form, or again by the voice; so in the arts above mentioned, taken as a whole, the imitation is produced by rhythm, language, or 'harmony,' either singly or combined.

- Aristotle *Poetics*

William Wordsworth: Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It has its origin in emotions recollected in tranquility.

S T Coleridge: Primary imagination is involuntary, an unconscious act of the mind. Secondary imagination is a faculty which helps the poet in revealing the beautiful and permanent forms of nature; it is the shaping spirit, a unifying and creative faculty.

Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is completely the product of his imagination, and is full of supernatural elements,

John Keats: If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not to come at all.

William Blake: "I am under the direction of messengers from heaven daily and nightly."

P B Shelley: poets are hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of the imagination'; and poetry is connate with the origin of man.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred.

- "In Defense of poetry"

Wallace Stevens: The poet is the priest of the invisible.

Agatha Christie: I don't know what put the Leonides family into my head- they just came. Then, like Topsy 'they grewed.

Northrop Fry: "In the critical path" Fry states that man lives in two worlds-one of reality (i.e. his objective environment) and the other of imagination, of desire, hope, belief, ambition and fantasy. In the second world which is the realm of literature and therefore, the language of it is metaphorical and mythical but not logical. It is through myth that the world can be apprehended.

Robert Frost: "I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering."

Dr Sir Muhammad Iqbal:

"Nikli to lab-e-Iqbal se par jane kiski hai ye sada

Paigam-e-sukoon pohancha bhi gayi dil mehfil ka tadpa bhi gayi".

Though uttered by Iqbal but know not whose is this voice?

Conveyed the message and shattered the heart of the gathering too.

All the aforementioned definitions are actually arguments supporting the theory of Inspiration.

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING CRAFT

Alexander Pope:

“True ease in poetry comes from art not chance;
 As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
 Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
 To copy nature is to copy them” -

-“*Essay on Criticism*”

T S Eliot: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality”.

The progress of an artist is a continual self sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

-“*Tradition and Individual Talent*”

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “Objective Correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”

“*On Hamlet*”

John Dryden: In his preface to ‘Religio Laisi’ Dryden says, “the expressions of a poem designed purely for instruction ought to be plain and natural, and yet majestic...the florid, elevated and figurative way is for the passions; for (these) are begotten in the soul by showing the objects out of their true proportion. *A man is to be cheated into passion but to be reasoned into truth*”.

The abovementioned descriptions are the strong arguments favouring the theory of art or craft.

COMMENTS ON THE THEORY OF CRAFT OR NEO-CLASSICAL POETRY:

Neoclassical writers tended to view literature as something “artificial” or “artificed,” something created by craft and study. Thus, craft and study are more important than talent or genius.

A poet was conceived no longer as someone specially gifted, but as an artisan, and in effect no spontaneous. Associations of ideas could be put into a poem. The art of poetry depended on the poet's knowledge of the rules of the craft. It freed the poet from superstitions, taught him to think steadily, and demanded of him a careful planning of a poem, a strict control of imagination and fancy. Imagination was controlled. One of the trends was rationalism. Poetry was generally written in poetic diction by the Neo-classical poets. Neo-classical poetry was mechanical and artificial to the last degree. It was “the product of intelligence playing upon the surface of life”. It conspicuously lacked in emotion and imagination. It was primarily rational, argumentative, satirical and didactic. It was also exclusively “town” poetry dealing with the aristocratic class of society. Rural life, nature and common men were derided by the Augustan poets. In respect of language and meter too, it was inflexible and rigid.

A notable critic Walsh wrote to pope:

“The best of the modern poets in all languages are those that have nearest copied the ancients.”

It was a literature of intelligence, of wit, and of fancy. Not a literature of emotion, passion or creative genius. Spontaneity and simplicity were sacrificed to the dominant mania for elegance and correctness. More emphasis was laid on the form than on the spirit.

Alexander Pope says,

“And this unpolished rugged verse I chose
As fittest for discourse and nearest prose” .

COMMENTS ON THE THEORY OF INSPIRATION OR ROMANTICISM:

As we are fully familiar with this fact, that poetry is not every one's cup of tea, and it is also obvious and evident that poetry cannot be produced by mere efforts. There is some element of inspiration existing in this matter which is why we find almost in all the ancient poems the invocation made to the mythical Muse of poetry. Even in John Milton (next to William Shakespeare in English Literature) we find same invocation to the heavenly muse of poetry. Coleridge, not only a well known poet of romantic era but also a philosopher who wrote 'Biographia Literaria' was unable to complete his famous poem 'Kubla Khan-a fragment' due to the disturbance of his friend's arrival at the moment or time of inspiration with the result 'Kubla Khan' remained a fragment. Quoting Plato 'there is a divinity moving you'. Romantics labored under a plethora of wit and imagination. When we consider poetry as inspiration and revelation, then, following the tradition is neither feasible nor the rule for the possessed poet. For following the rules laid down by ancients is the legacy of those who believe in craft. Now the question is how he succeeds in following the rhyme, rhythm and trend of his era or movement? The moment the poet is possessed, he is not only possessed but also preoccupied with certain prerequisites (rhyme, rhythm trend or movement etc.) to that degree that he adjusts the matter (inspiration) accordingly. It will not be unjust to accuse the possessed poet of not being able to move out of the trend on account of the preoccupation. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': a fragment is a great example. Even we don't have paucity of those poets who are unlettered but still good at poetry. Quoting Plato here will make it easier to decipher. Plato says, 'For the poet is a light winged and holy thing, and there is no inventions in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him : when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles. The gift which you possess is not an art but an inspiration; there is divinity moving you. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art but because they are inspired and possessed.

Here it is also necessary to mention that, Creative writings do have this touch of inspiration which cannot be denied but Critical writings are absolutely free from it.

To conclude this issue I would like to take refuge in W.B. Yeats' poem "Adam's Curse" in which he addresses the same subject.

“And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these,
(And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones)

I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.'

Here, two endearing friends are together and are discussing poetry. They discuss how writing poetry is in itself labouring. How hours can pass as they try to create a poem but no one cares of their hard efforts. They know that even though a poem seems natural and easy it is much more painful and complicated than you think. The real act of poetry must come from labouring from within you. Since the fall of Adam things necessitate labour.