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A Creative Response to Poetic Creation: A New Aesthetic for Critical Appreciation

Dr. J. S. Anand, Ph.D.

Abstract

Poetry is coming into life of a moment, which then starts growing, and acquiring an entity of its own; it leaves behind its parent, the poet, and even the reader has no control over it. Controlling such a living object is fraught with dangerous consequences, and the utmost danger is that: its originality, its freshness, its identity, and its ultimate dignity and charm can be lost, if it is looked at through colored glasses. Whenever a reader approaches a poem, if he is a student of English literature, he immediately wants to know who the author was/is, then he goes on to determine his age, and then, before he has looked into the poem, he tries to locate the school to which the author belonged/s. Doesn't this affect the originality of response? Doesn't it affect the originality of the text? Doesn't it compromise the dignity of the poem?

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This article tries to analyze the effect of approaching a poem or a poet with a pre-formed mind, laden with pre-conceived notions. When a reader has already formed a view that the poet is from this school of thought, half the meaning of the poem is already super imposed. For example, a poem by William Wordsworth is expected to be a romantic creation, and before the poem is approached, a whole plethora of impressions regarding romantic poetry starts making a web in the mind of the reader, ultimately fixing the poem in those parameters, whether or not it was a romantic one. In other words, an attempt has been made to assess how far it is right to study a poem by first of all referring to a writer's affiliations with a particular school of poetry.

The article further goes on to argue that dividing literature into various schools and then applying the parameters of these schools of poetic creation is a self-defeating exercise, because when a poem is created, the schools become non-functional, ideology takes a back seat, and the poem is complete in itself, without accruing to it any meanings beyond the text. Another argument that the author wishes to make here is that the school system is only an attachment; it makes the poetic flow develop a heavy weight of isms, and poetry, instead of being an original flight, turns into a highly calculated exercise, marring its originality, its freshness, and its individual identity. The critics often end up turning the poem into a cripple, unable to sustain itself, unless it is being given a prop of the ideology to which the poet belonged.

For Whom the Pen Rolls!

The major question here is: for whom the poetry has been composed. Is it only for students of English literature? Or is it for general consumption? It is difficult to believe that a poem has been written for a select few. Once a poetic creation has taken shape on the paper, after that, it belongs to the world. It belongs to society. Just as the kids belong to the human race, so does a poem, once created, joins its ranks among the mortals as well as the immortals of creativity. In the sky, there are some stars which are visible. There have been so many which are not visible. Same is the case with poets. Some are shining like stars. Some are simply invisible. But a poem once created ceases to belong to one person. By using copyright, a poet can claim

his right over the body of the poem, but its mind belongs to the human race and its fragrance does not abide by the rules of the copyright.

“We Murder to Dissect”

The teachers and the students of literature believe that it is for them to declare whether a poem is a romantic creation, or it belongs to the neo-classics, or the sentimentalists, or the moderns. Our examiners too ask such questions when they demand of a student to critically examine a poetic text. If a student is unable to place an English author into an age or a school, he is labeled as unread in literature. But, it is a highly contestable idea to think that literature is written for a few in the departments who sit on the coffee tables, and decide which poet belongs to which age, and which poem has romantic elements. I wonder if any student down the centuries has ever tried to find anything else out of the poetic works of William Wordsworth, other than that his creations had romantic elements. It would be really surprising if someone were to discover romantic elements from Pope’s poetry. It is difficult to swallow the idea that T.S. Eliot was a modern, and had nothing of a romantic or a neo-classicist. In fact, what our scholars are doing with poetry is an injustice of sorts. They approach a poem with pre-conceived notions. And when a plastic coating is done around a plant, it refuses to grow. It loses its original shine. It also loses its nutritional value. This is what is happening to poetry, which is subjected to clinical tests, with a hypothesis that it belongs to a particular school, and then, hence proved. It is not appreciation; it is a travesty of the whole idea of appreciation. Wordsworth was not far from reality when he said: “We murder to dissect”. If ‘dissection’ can be taken to mean compartmentalization of poetry, certainly, we end up murdering it. Although he said it in a different vein, what he said is quite apt in our context here. Clinical dissection with pre-formed ideas plays with the life of the patient, here the poetic creation, and may prove things which do not belong to it.

How Ordinary People React – Well Beyond Critical Tools

If poetry and literature are meant for people, as the case in reality is, it is more important how ordinary people interpret it. They are not trained in the application of critical tools. They

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are not aware of schools. They are not ready to dissect it. For them, poetry is meant for aesthetic pleasure. And they love the poems which connect directly with their blood. Poems which elude the understanding of common people, turn into elitist, and lose their vast spectrum of influence, that is the common people at large.

Individuality of the Poem, the Poet and the Reader under Threat

In the critical exercise, what the people tend to ignore is the individuality of the creation, the creator, and the receiver. A poem is an individual piece, and the poet has written it at an individual moment, and the reader too is an individual person, receiving the poem at an individual moment. This first impression of the poem on the reader, and of the reader on the poem, must be more lasting than the meanings which are heaped upon them, as a result of their belonging to different schools. When a poet is conceiving a poem, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that he is not aware of his school of thought. *Creation is a highly natural phenomenon which relates more to his blood, than to his mind. The creator is a representative of the Muse, not of any ideology, at the moment of creation. It is a sacred and hallowed moment, like the birth of a child, which is a cosmic event, with all its ramifications.*

The moment the reader is reading the poem is also a moment invested with great significance. This is the moment which can turn him into a Revolutionary. But it will happen only when the march towards a poem is not tempered with any pre-laid notions. When a reader moves towards a poem with a clean slate, the poem can work on his mind like an x-ray machine, and leave its imprints on the canvas. *If the mind is already crowded with theories, and critical practices, no poem can have an individual reception. Like birth and death, which are individual events, poetic creation and poetic reception too are highly individualized events, at which crowds are not allowed.*

The best appreciation of a poem is whether it serves to improve the lot of society, or it says nothing except the grief of the poet. It might matter how it is all expressed, which falls into the realm of expression, and carries its importance so far as aesthetic joy is concerned, yet

imprisoning the poem into a cage, and then, expecting it to fly, is an unjust passion, which has become a fashion among our critical canonists.

Creative Response to Poetic Creation

No genuine critic of poetry likes a poem which does not fall in the already cut out and closely defined categories of critical perception. They have a great limitation which forces them to think about a poem in a set fashion. Even if the poem has an identity beyond their notions, they try to beat it down, and prune its wings, so that it could be roasted or turned into chicken tikka only. They cannot afford to create out of it anything that is new simply because they have never learnt to fly, they have never thought that something new could be said, they have always believed that what they have known is final; and they do not believe anyone else can say anything more than they have read or known.

What is felt lacking here is a creative response to creativity, leaving the beaten track, and giving allowance to a poet to say things which general norms do not expect from him. *Just as every man born to this earth, who may belong to a particular religion, still has an individual destiny, because he is born different, he lives differently, and individually, and he dies too in a highly individual manner, similar argument can be extended to a poetic creation as well. More than belonging to any school, it is an original creation, independent, self-created, breathing a life of its own, and representing a truth, evident to the poet at that moment. Poetry is coming into life of a moment, which then starts growing, and acquiring an entity of its own, it leaves behind its parent, the poet, and even the reader has no control over it. Controlling such a living object is fraught with dangerous consequences, and the utmost danger is that its originality, its freshness, its identity, and its ultimate charm can be lost, if is looked at through colored glasses.*

Dividing Poets in Schools

The study of English literature has been based on various schools of poetry. There is no harm in these divisions, for the sake of understanding, but still, it can be a better alternative if these schools and their defining parameters do not start dictating the response of the readers of

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poetry. Who has seen the Tropic of Capricorn? Or even the Equator? These are imaginary lines. Same is the case with these schools. However, it is better understood when literary divisions are made on the basis of representative figures like Victorian novel, Jacobian drama, Restoration period. But when it comes to romantic age, and the age of reason, these dividing lines become more illusory, and at the same time, cause hurdles in a creative response to poetic creation, when they crowd the mind of the innocent reader with a thousand preconceptions, which, thereafter, he starts applying to these unsuspecting poems.

Varying Moments and Varying Poetry

There is one more argument in favour of my assertions above. These days, so many people are creating poetry. Sometimes, the same mind comes up with a highly tragic poem, which resembles Hardy's 'Lines Written in a Country Church Yard' and sometimes, the same heart spring up with a romantic lyric like 'The Solitary Reaper'. One can find another moment in the life of the same poet when he is writing heroic couplets and churning out poems in the vein of Pope. In the case of such a poet, how can anybody, any trained mind, decide to which period, or even to which school he belongs? Moreover, it is only an imposition if one is to accept that the romantic era did not have writers who wrote in the vein of the sentimentalists, or even, Pope's heroic couplets.

Surgery upon a Poem

Relating a poetic creation to schools is like tying a heavy weight on the wings of the poem, and cripple it in its flight. The reader, whose mind is injected with a heavy dose of theoretical perceptions, captures the poem, makes it lie on the operation table, gives in anesthesia, and then, tries to find out, from its system, what he had been told to find. The 'trained' mind of the reader is incapable of thinking that the poem, lying on the operation table, is a living identity, and it deserves personal treatment and before that, one has to recognize its independence, its identity to be, and then approach it safeguarding its dignity. The way a poem is approached in the literary canon is like making it stand before a cannon, and then blast it into pieces. A poem is an organic whole, and trying to deconstruct it or analyzing it by applying any

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other critical theories might show in it what dwells in the mind of the reader, and it may or may not be in the poem, or its creator. A poem no doubt completes its journey work when it lands in the heart of the reader and starts communicating with him. It lights up his mind and gets lighted up with his brilliance. But this union of the poem and the receptor must be a highly creative event, in which the poem is respected as a whole individual and fresh for the reader, as a bride on her bridal night.

Conclusion – Let Us Not Put Poetic Creation into Bundles!

It can be safely argued that these divisions of ages and schools are only a literary convenience, and they should not be made to stand between the poet and his creation on one side; and between the poem and the receptor on the other. Teaching these schools to the students of English literature without making allowance for a dispassionate, unprejudiced and individual approach to a poem, or say, a creative response, would end up ‘killing’ a poem, because, as already stated, a poem is an independent entity, and not to talk of a school, it does not belong to the same mind, at different moments of creation. Poetry demands an approach which is tinged with no pre-thought school, and which is fresh for each piece. Poetry is written for the people and the people appreciate it in their own individual ways. In the present set up, a creative response to poetry appears to be sorely lacking. Instead of poems, the present system believes in turning them into bundles and then labeling them. It can happen to scientific writing, or prose, but such a treatment with poetic creation is highly uncreative and unjust, because it kills the spirit of the poem and revels in the values which exist outside it.

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