

Spontaneity and the Creative Impulse

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Abstract

Spontaneity takes over when mind becomes a passive receptacle, and some oracle is being downloaded through the pen, like something received on the fax machine. Can we tamper with the matter on the fax machine? What has to come has to come. And the form is definitely not to stand in the way of poetic creation.

Keywords:

Wordsworth, dissociation, sensibility, spontaneity, creative, impulse, Eliot.

INTRODUCTION

There has always been a debate whether poetry is a consciously cultivated art, as espoused by Alexander Pope, or a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' as William Wordsworth ordained in 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*', though he went on to contradict he, in the same sentence when he adds, "poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity". Such ideas emerge from the poetic phase in which the individual writers are rooted. In English literature, poetry was the dominant genre, and the best examples of this poetic creation are available in the Renaissance drama. Shakespeare's sonnets provide a rich feast of the poetic creation at its best. But, the movement of time witnessed a crack in the poetic sensibility with Milton. Thereafter, even in the poetic creation, the amalgamating and unifying powers of imagination were relegated to the background, and the entire focus of the neo-classical age was in favour of reason, the Age of Reason as it has been called. Here, one finds a complete breach between thought and feeling, and the precedence accorded to reason. By the passage of time, a reaction against this penchant for reason also sets in. The subject of poetry, which for Pope was the courtly living, at the expense of nature, and the real language of the people, again finds its challenger, in the Romantics who asserted that the individual, his mind, his imagination, his language, and the country life were the real subjects of poetry. True to their assertions, Romantic poetry is replete with elements of magic, music, mystery and melancholy. Attendant on this, Wordsworth came out with his

famous definition of poetry, referred to above. However, this idea of Wordsworth was challenged by T.S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" in which he emphasized the existence of literature as a body and each new poet or writer adding something new to it.

The subject of study for this paper is Spontaneity and the Creative Impulse. I wish to examine the poetic creed of William Wordsworth with regard to the creation of poetry, and come to a conclusion as to how far his assertions inform his own poetry and to point out whether there is more to the creative impulse than mere a spontaneous overflow of feeling.

Eliot's Concept of 'Poetic Sensibility'

The poets and critics down the ages have looked upon poetry as a blend of thought and feeling. While referring to Donne's poetry, T.S. Eliot remarks that "Donne yokes thought and feeling together, with violence" and Dryden, in an disapproving tone, uses the word 'metaphysic' for Donne, [thus he 'affects his metaphysics'], which was later to become a catch phrase for Metaphysical poets. It is on the basis of this fine blending of feeling and thought that T.S. Eliot has described him as the best of poets. T.S. Eliot then based his idea of dissociation of sensibility on the basis of his conception of poetic sensibility as having the twin capabilities to feel and think simultaneously, as it was present in Donne, who could "feel his thoughts" without making any reference to Coleridge's definition of

imagination, as an ‘simplistic power’ which re-creates the disparate elements of experience into a unified whole. T.S. Eliot further states that the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ started with poets like Milton and, thereafter, the gap between feeling and thought widened with the Neo-Classical who rejected spontaneity, feeling, and espoused the cause of thought and society at the cost of the individual and his creative genius, his imagination.

Here, one can see thought and emotion, feeling and rationality, locked in a conflict of sorts. While Pope gives precedence to thought, to the utter disregard of emotion, Wordsworth considers the reverse as the real poetry.

Conflict between Spontaneity and Conscious Art

Now, what is the truth about poetry as a creative impulse? Is it spontaneous, or a conscious wordplay? Then, there are other adjuncts to this question also, whether rhymed poetry is poetry, or the modern poetry which is bound in rhythmic feet, to utter neglect of rhyme. Those who spent a lot of time learning and then applying iambic pentameter, were they really spontaneous poets? Can poetry be contained in already fixed containers? And, still more serious is the proposition that poetry can be taught in classes, where teachers teach the basics of the rhymes and iambic pentameter, etc.

These are questions basic to the nature of the creative impulse. When applied to fine arts, like paintings, a person who is painting out of a spontaneous outflow of feeling, does he remember

that he belongs to a particular school of painting? And if he knows, he also knows that his painting has to be of a specific kind. Once this idea gets into his head, it will play a spoilsport with his creative flow. The fact is that painters paint what comes to their mind, and in the way it comes to their mind, and it is the viewers and critics to whom is left the job of giving brand names to their work. Painters and writers for that matter are like performers, who are busy in their job of creation, while there are readers, viewers and critics who analyse their work and classify it in various forms and genres.

Idea of Spontaneity: Creation precedent over Conclusions:

Here an important point to be noted is that it is the conclusion which follows the creation; and not the other way round. In other words, it can be said that creation precedes all values attached to it by the world. Any person, who is consciously following a particular style, actually imposes limitations on his creativity.

The idea of spontaneity needs to be looked into closely. Wordsworth might be saying that it is “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, but I think even he was not spontaneous in his poetic creations. For that matter, spontaneity eludes even Keats and Shelley. *Spontaneity takes over when mind becomes a passive receptacle, and some oracle is being downloaded through the pen, like something received on the fax machine. Can we tamper with the matter on the fax machine? What has to come has to come. And the form is definitely not to stand in the way of poetic creation.*

Form here stands for all the stylistic tools used for writing various kinds of poetry.

Content versus Form: Rhyme versus Reason

Here, we can also relate to the idea of content and form. Content can be a spontaneous selection as the subject of creative activity, but the form is the style imposed on creative impulse, to give it a certain identifiable shape. And most of the poetry written by the poets is in one form or the other. We have seen lesser poets struggle with their words, changing this and that here and there, to fit into a proper rhyme. Here, it is not the meaning, but the form which is apparently more emphasised.

Another question pops up here. Is form the real poetry? Or is content the real poetry? If two lines rhyme, is it poetry? Rhyming lines as poetry is the tradition that we have inherited down the centuries, which lacks the basic reason. Every rhyming line cannot be poetic. But, who can deny the power and thrust of the poetry of Dr. Faustus? Even when it does not rhyme? Poets like T.S. Eliot struggled, not only with form, but also with content, and leaving behind works like 'The Wasteland' which are like sacred texts of modern age. Notwithstanding the fact that so much formulation, so much inter-textuality, so much allusiveness, has gone into its making, that the end product, like a nutritious dessert, [with its high powered density of vertical depth and horizontal expansiveness] is relished by everyone, but digested only by 'pundits' i.e. scholars only. Wordsworth's idea of 'spontaneous

overflow of powerful feelings' looks entirely alien to this poetry, which is a social and spiritual document, rather than being an expression of the sudden feelings of a poet. And the poetry of the modern era, and post-modern era, too defies all the logic of spontaneity. Because poets are politically activated, and write poetry, not inspired by the muse, but by their public stance. Angst is also one major stimulus for poetic creation. These things may determine the content, but how that content comes in the poetic form needs much space for discussion.

People who use conscious art on poetry, play with its spontaneous nature, and those who try to reduce it to fixed jars of iambic pentameter, or heroic couplet etc. and spend days and nights on making the lines rhyme, work less like poets and more like lab technicians. Creative impulse gets sabotaged as soon as the feeling for the form clicks in while the process of reception of ideas and emotions is on. Once disturbed, the poet's mind cannot be returned to those thoughts which had generated those feelings in that particular moment.

Going by Wordsworth's definition of poetry, spontaneous feelings cannot be contained in predetermined or even post determined jars. It is not that you have got poetic impulse, you have put everything on paper, and then, you can apply your art on it... cut and paste it, modify it... now your mind will be active as a conscious agent, in this way, poetry can be made into a stylistic tool, something more can be added to the original pure feeling, and more value can be attached to it, while giving it a verbal expression, and sometimes, the original message is lost in the ornamentation and the clothing that is done, with labour day and night. All these arts which poets employ,

infringe on the originality and spontaneity of the original impulse. Keeping this in view, even Wordsworth appear to have overstated the idea of spontaneity because it does not fit into his own verses as well, because Wordsworth wrote poetry in a fixed meter and when we are applying the meter, it means we are conscious, and consciousness is antithetical to spontaneity. *When conscious art is on leash, spontaneity is a casualty, because meter means a manipulation of spontaneity.* Even Keats and Shelley do not fall into that category of spontaneous overflow of emotion, because although they are ecstatic in their Odes, still they are conscious artists. Keats, no doubt said, 'poetry comes to me as leaves to a tree'. Now, this is a spontaneous act. And the leaves are neither bound in a refrain, nor in a particular pentameter. The shape of the leaves is determined by the creative genius of the tree. Not the infringing intentions of the gardener. Poet is not a gardener. He is the tree and the shape of the leaves is to be determined by his creative genius, not by the boundaries of the verse-cages which are like containers to the poetry. Even rhyme, which is forced, is a challenge to spontaneity.

Spontaneity and the Songs:

The idea of rhyme leads us straight into the heart of folk songs, which are finest poetry in themselves. They too rhyme. Songs are made to rhyme. Songs are a part of the conscious aspect of poetry in which rhymes and rhythm are carefully chosen. However, much depends on the creative genius of the poet, how naturally he can respond to the stimuli, and how fast his mind can pick up the essence of the message and transfer it into rhymes, effortlessly.

Pope manipulated words to rhyme in the heroic couplet. There was no inspiration, only perspiration. And some critics have gone to the length of saying that Pope was not a poet. At the most he was writing rhyming prose, overloaded with idea, and philosophy. And the romantic poetry was a reaction to the poetic creed of Pope, who laid no store by spontaneity, intuition, imagination and even the individual.

Repetition in the context of Spontaneity:

Often in poetry, it is seen that there is a repetition of some lines after regular intervals. It means the idea in the poetic creation is related back to its beginning. It is a stylistic tool, which goes against the spirit of poetry rooted in spontaneity. I have referred to songs, which are a conscious creation, in which the lines in the beginning are repeated after regular intervals. Then, the rhyme of the lines is repeated at regular intervals as in a sonnet.

However, there are some ideas which need to be dealt with here. When a bird is in ecstasy, it starts singing. When a man is in ecstasy, he too sings songs of love for his lady love. Hymns are written in the ecstatic mode. I think songs composed in a fit of ecstasy have to be looked at from a different perspective, because here, the conscious artistic effort is not attendant, and no artistic tools are being applied. Only a simple emotion is being given a vent, which happens to be poetic. Poetry and passion go together. Passion is the momentum of the poetic creation, and they are expressed through different minds in different ways.

Conclusion: How spontaneity works its way:

The idea of poetry being composed spontaneously appears to be a misconception. Poetry cannot be culled away from its social and political functions. Poetry which is created in political and social vacuum lacks immortality. On the other hand, even Wordsworth made the idea of spontaneity of poetry unworkable by adding in the same sentence that poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquillity”. However, spontaneity lies in the selection of the content, and then it is the creative flow which does the selection, so far as the form is concerned. It depends on the creative genius of the poet, and the assimilative powers of his sensibility, which turn a feeling into a thought at the strike of seconds. Creation of poetry is actually a simultaneous process. An idea strikes the mind of the poet. The idea comes out of his associative memory. Or there can be some stimulus outside. Once this stimulus switches the poet’s sensibility on, ideas start framing themselves, and images start gushing out from the memory-bank as well as the creative imagination of the poet. Now, this is a spontaneous activity absolutely depending on the creative prowess of the poet. After some time, the volcanic eruption is off. The lava lies on the breast of the paper. The best poets whose creative processing is of a high order do not need to modify and re-arrange the words, the lines, and the images that have been rendered before them. However, the lesser ones carry a hundred tools to apply their art on them, and then, finish them into a work of art.

What is the best? Here is a comparison: the man who was created by nature, having the earth-wit; or the gentleman, who has been created by

conscious processing? I do not think any degree of education, training etc. can be equated with a man’s original being, and his original sense. Here, we can find a conflict with man’s spontaneity as well as his trained self. Society kills his spontaneity. Education sneaks into his being. And he is turned into a trained mind, fit to be used purposefully in a social context. The Steppen Wolf is exorcised, and he is rendered ‘fit’ to remain in the prison of societal norms.

Same thing happens to poetry. The spontaneous verse is the verse of the highest order. And all the poetry, which is embellished and ornate, and classified into containers, cannot access the charm or originality and spontaneity which turn the creation into a divine expression, inspired by the muse.

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