

POETRY AS AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION OF MYSTIC EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Art is a human activity but its distinctiveness lies in being independent. A poet as an artist has certainly some initial motivating impulse, albeit love for women, country, God, world, Nature etc. This artistic impulse is free from the set norms and social conventions. What urges an artist to express an inner excitement, restlessness, and compulsion to express the inexpressible experiences to the external world. Poetry is a pure art, because it serves as an ultimate medium for the ineffable experiences and observations particularly when a mystic poet who feels pain to give vent to his spiritual achievements. The present paper tries to illustrate such mystic experiences that have tempted the mystic poets to use poetry as an artistic expression. Though there is a lot of work done on mysticism and mystic poetry but my paper has a distinct perspective and throws light on the mystic tendencies of some of the great English mystic poets mentioned in the paper.

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. 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 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" (Collingwood 1958). Painting and sculpture can be taught in some schools but poetry is a purer art in that poets are born, they are not made in schools. What urges a poet to express is an inner excitement, restlessness, and compulsion to express the emotive and divine experience; it is done not at bidding of any outside authority. Mystic Poetry as an art is independent of any audience because poetry is an effusion of feelings, emotions which are adequately personal and subjective.

Poetry exists and exults in metaphysical thoughts. It is that "life-enhancing power" which has been recognized as the highest quality of the artistic mind. The true mystic is a person in whom the artistic and visionary powers are exalted to the point of genius: in whom the

transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness, and who has definitely surrendered himself to the embrace of Ultimate Reality.

A poet endeavours to provide the readers a hint of his/her ecstasy in the veil of earthly words or sounds because he feels an extreme urge and inescapable longing to give vent to his emotions and his glance/impression of truth. It is a very difficult task, even in the most favourable circumstances, to represent even a fraction of his/her vision. A mystic strives very hard to divulge his secrets to the wayward world. But he faces enormously increased number of hesitations because there is the huge incongruity between his unspeakable experience and the language which fails to express his experience properly and can at the most suggest it. There stands a great barrier between his spiritual mind and the mind of the external world. A mystic poet feels a kind of demand to enchant his readers/ listeners while addressing them. They must be caught up to something of his inner state before they can be made to realize. Hence “a mystic uses poetic language to explore the ineffable that allows him to speak more freely” (Evelyn Underhill 1911: 75)

Mystics of all school insist that their experiences are not reducible to words, and few of them have had any interest in art or poetry or music as such. Their own artistic productions may be good, bad, or indifferent; though at the time of composition they doubtless think they are an ‘indication’ of the highest truth. (*ibid.*) However, Islamic mystics (Sufis) insist that their experiences can best be expressed in poetry. Persian mysticism is largely expressed in poetry, and frequently in poetry of a very high order. The fact remains that the essence of it is expressed with much more accuracy and force in the aphorisms of the early Sufis on which their more sophisticated successors built.

So a question arises as to what extent can what is mystical or deeply religious be expressed poetically and how far should this poetic medium be trusted upon to accomplish this communication between a poet and the audience? Mystical meditation and religious adoration often get along very well such that the observations and the experiences of this kind can be clearly spoken/ expressed in poems. According to A.N. Dhar, “Ordinarily, those who conceive of Reality in transcendental terms find an inherent inadequacy in language as a medium of communication. At the same time, it is interesting to see how poetic language performs the paradoxical function of suggesting experiences from which ordinary speech turns back in dismay. Ernst Cassirer speaks of the inherent power of language itself that is exploited by the articulate mystic:” (Dhar 1985 : 4)

For a mystic poet it is hard to convey his experiences without earthly symbols or images, which, though, are insubstantial to his vision. His experience must be expressed in any way. It has to be communicated. Even though it is actually inexpressible, a mystic poet can in a sidelong way speak in hints or give some parallel which would stimulate the dormant intuition of the audience. A mystic poet achieves self realization which is the gift of the inner energy which manifests itself as a cool wind. According to Emily Dickinson the moments of this atonement with Nature or Self happens when this wind is within. She claims that she had no other means to discriminate these qualities in art, as she says:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know of.

In this way a mystic poet is able to convey the ineffable through poetry beyond its surface sense. A mystic poet is successful in inducing in sensitive persons something of the torpid ecstasy of dream by symbolism and imagery and also by the rhythmic and exalted language. As

Evelyn Underhill rightly points out, “Mystical, no less than musical and poetic perception, tends naturally to present itself in rhythmical periods: a feature which is also strongly marked in writings obtained in the automatic state” (Evelyn Underhill 1911: 78).

An experience closely related to the mystical that we discussed above is what may be termed as a visionary experience. Often mystics of the visionary type experience an illuminated vision of the world. In their heightened state, they see the natural world around them transfigured, “clothed in celestial light”. “It remains a paradox that the mystic poet finds suitable words and symbols to present an approximate image of the very reality he affirms “hath no image”. Mystics have, in fact, given to poets “a large number of poetic similes, metaphors, such as the Desert of Godhead, the Marriage of the Soul, the Kiss of the Christ, the Cloud of Unknowing, the Divine Dark and the Beatific Vision, to name only few.”(Itrat Hussain 1948: 34) Although whether drugs actually open “the doors of perception” (for instance Coleridge’s poetry) or not is difficult to establish. What is, however, significant is that the visionary imagination of the mystical type does not differ quantitatively from the poetic imagination (making use of sensorial images), when both are viewed as involving an expansion of consciousness. This leads us to the conclusion that poetry and mysticism are closely related, and it is wrong to see the dichotomy between them. In this context Helen C. White makes an important observation. She says:

It is not a strange hybrid of poet and mystic who writes a mystical poem. It is not a man who writes first as a mystic and then as a poet. It is not even a mystic who turns over to the poet who happens to dwell within the same brain and body the materials of his insight to be made into a work of art by the competent craftsman. It is rather that the same human being is at once poet and mystic, at one and the same time, from the beginning of the process to the end (Helen C. White 1936: 202).

In English literature Mystical thought occurs throughout in various degrees and forms. From the fourteenth century onwards, the mystical tradition grew steadily in England. Contemplation was then socially recognized as the noblest activity one could engage in. Richard Rolle of Hampole (1300-1349 AD) was the earliest of the English mystics to communicate his experiences in his own tongue. The distinguishing mark of his mystical experience is that it is expressed by him in terms of imagery drawn from music (A. N. Dhar 1985). Another fourteen century Englishman who made a valuable contribution to mystical literature is the unknown author of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing.’ The concept represented by the “cloud” symbol derives actually from the “fundamental treatise on the (negative path) *Via Negativa*, The Mystical Theology of the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite”(Phyllis Hodgson 1967: 12). In the seventeenth century mystical verse flourished in England and a number of poets belonging to the “school of Donne,” known popularly as the Divine poets of the seventeenth century, distinguished themselves by writing verse that gave superb expression to their religious experience (Dhar 1985). The Divine poets mentioned above, notably George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan, wrote poetry in the “metaphysical” manner of Donne, but this did not stand in the way of their developing individual styles of their own. Their devotional poems are not just effusions but products of craftsmanship. Donne’s important contribution lay in the forging of a new poetic language that served as a model for the poets of his “school.” In his hands, poetry acquired a distinctively intellectual tone and this is reflected in the religious lyrics of the Divine poets. Donne himself wrote poems addressed to the Divine which are a record of his religious experience.

George Herbert altered the poetry of metaphysical wit into the poetry of religious experience. He presents a language that is neat, polished and refined. In his religious lyrics, he seems to be on terms with the Divine. The poem ‘Love’ could serve as an illustrative example:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne
 But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew near to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack’d anything.

.....
 You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat. (George Herbert)

It is clear from the poem that Herbert has incorporated Donne’s manner and reshaped it to satiate his poetical need. It is a plain discussion between two persons where an argument is built up as a theme and, according to Joan Bennett, “The relation between the soul and God is symbolized by a commonplace human situation, a travel-worn and shame-faced guest receiving hospitality” (Bennett 1971: 68).

An awareness of the divine spirit inhabiting Nature is conveyed through a language artfully simple. In William Wordsworth’s poems we notice a similar pattern of classical meditation which corresponds / conforms to Nature not to religion. So there is not a religious Deity but Nature as an object of worship. Wordsworth associates sacred feelings with the Wye Valley, in his poem, *Tintern Abbey*:

The sounding cataract
 haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
 the mountain, and deep and gloomy wood,
 their colours and their forms, were then to me
 an appetite; a feeling and a love, (Wordsworth)

“His recollections promote his understanding and strengthen his faith in Nature, and in the traditional manner of a devotee, he resolves to persevere in his meditations” (Wlecke1973: 20-21). To see what is mystical in the poem, we look at the famous passage of *Tintern Abbey*:

To them I may have owed another gift. Nor less, I trust
 Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
 In which the burthen of the mystery,
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world,
 Is lightened; that serene and blessed mood,
 In which the affections gently lead us on,
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
 And even the motions of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In body, and become a living soul;
 While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
 We see into the life of things. (Wordsworth)

The language of the poem bears the credibility of a vivid and living experience. The words “body” and “soul” are crucial to our understanding of the experience that is recorded in

these lines. Mystics speak of things incommunicable, beyond the domain of the senses and the normal powers of human perception. Wordsworth's mystical intuition is not of that order. He is essentially a "sensationalist" and his "mysticism is grounded and rooted actually in the senses" (Garrod 1963: 105). In the subsequent lines of the poem, Wordsworth betrays a lack of confidence in the authenticity of his experience. This is understandable. His memory flashes of insight were not powerful enough to dispel his doubts completely. That explains the wariness with which he states his unsure belief. What he meant by seeing "into the life of things" is, however, made explicit in these lines:

. . . And I have felt
A presence, that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of settings suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky and the mind of the man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, and objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (*Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth)

The use of the words "something", "sublime", "presence", "motion" indicate that the poet is cautiously avoiding theological terms and trying to hint at what he has perceived in his heightened mood. He seems to have had an experience of the mystical type as suggested by the word "felt" but he is not prepared to state it as a doctrine. He describes it best as a "sense sublime" of the ultimate unity of mind and Nature, the individual and the universe. On the whole, the poem reveals Wordsworth's reverence for Nature, his concern for suffering humanity and his mystical belief that all which we behold is full of blessing.

Quite often mystics talk in the riddles and parables. Even though they may convey their message in simple idiom, the meaning is not always easy to grasp. This is characteristically true of Blake. Blake, a mystic poet, was throughout conscious of his role as a 'prophet'. He conceived that it was his duty to bring 'mystical illumination' to ordinary man (Underhill 1961: 235). His poems are evident of his unique perception and his ability to look at life from an unusual mystical angle. His poetic vision conveys a surprise of "revelation". His stress on the cultivation of the 'Imagination' proceeds from his concern for man's spiritual regeneration. Everything Blake created--his poems, his engravings, his illuminated books--were for the purpose of revealing to people the Higher Reality. In "Jerusalem" he writes:

"I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity." (Blake)

He is an articulate mystic of the "psychological type known as 'visionary'" (Rudd 1953: 16). Revealed truths come to him in the form of vivid images. He has an intimate experience of cosmic consciousness inasmuch as he can see "a world in a grain of sand" (*Auguries of Innocence*, Blake). He never doubted his prophetic powers and believed that he held free converse with angels. All such beliefs were grounded in the quality of his visions which differed from those of his fellow-mystics in being "corporeal" and not just "imaginary." Gifted with "sacramental perception", he sees the Infinite in all beings. He looks upon the senses "as the gateway to eternity" and values human love for its essentially divine character. (A.N. Dhar 1985)

Evelyn Underhill says, “All kinds of symbolic language come naturally to the articulate mystic, who is often a literary artist as well: so naturally, that he sometimes forgets to explain that his utterance is but symbolic—a desperate attempt to translate the truth of that world into the beauty of this. It is here that mysticism joins hands with poetry” (Evelyn Underhill 1911) Further, poetry brings with it, in a far greater degree, a strange exhilaration as if we were brought near to some mighty source of being, on the verge of the secret which all seek. Every great work of art arises out of the depths of some extreme experiences and Mystic poetry is the best example in itself. Poetic expression of a mystic and vicarious experience of the listener has inevitable impacts on one another’s consciousness. Poetry as an art has an intrinsic value and their importance lies within themselves. Poetry of highest degree is always mystic. A poet is thus a mystic, whether consciously or unconsciously, for no one can write poetry without inspiration. When a poet strikes the mysterious depths of the spirit then he pens down a poem, as an oyster gives birth to a pearl. When the soul of a mystic poet is intoxicated with the knowledge of self and unanimity of life it feels uneasiness and an urge to express in the form of poetry and this becomes a true art.

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