

Civilization Age

“AS CIVILIZATION ADVANCES POETRY ALMOST NECESSARILY DECLINES”

The authenticity of this hurried statement of young Macaulay has been exposed to criticism from various quarters. But at the same time, it cannot be denied that this controversial point has its own charm and weight which has withstood the adverse criticism. The terms Civilization and Poetry have a wide range of definitions and aspects. Every aspect, introduces us to a new standpoint. And it is in the light of these that the decline and rise of poetry can be determined.

Civilized age, as Macaulay makes use of the term, is an enlightened one in which intelligence, science, philosophy, just classification and subtle analysis abound. Along with the abundance of wit and eloquence, abundance of verses and even of good ones, but little poetry, are other characteristics of the enlightened ages. Civilization is in a way the framework of our life. It is, of course, different from culture which is an inner quality of mind. Now the advancement of civilization means the refinement and growth of a critical attitude. Taken as a whole, when the material framework of life grows more complicated, the paraphernalia of life improves, civilization advances.

Similarly, poetry is defined by Macaulay as an art of employing words in such a manner as to produce illusion-the art of doing with words, what a painter does by means of colour. Poetry requires from us imagination-a sort of fine frenzy based on truth; may we call the truth of madness. The effect of imagination on children justifies the truth in the imaginative art, of which poetry is an indispensable part. As far as the enjoyment of poetry is concerned, perhaps no person can be a poet or enjoy poetry without an unsoundness of mind. This again is a controversial point, but let us for the time being take it as it is. In the same way poetry is much more than merely an imaginative art. It is beauty, wonder are primary, but anyhow according to one school of thought it is all imagination.

Opposed to civilized state of society, there is the primitive which has been called the age of simple words and vivid impressions. In such an age people are children in a way, but definitely with a greater variety of ideas. If poetry does not advance in an enlightened age it is only in this age of society, that the poetical temperament is at its highest perfection. There we find a kind of abnormality-say of a devotee who worships in a strange manner. The intensity of emotion is the chief trait in this age. The intensification of emotion must be there. It is not the

pain or pleasure which matters but it is to be replaced by agony and ecstasy. Such an atmosphere is quite congenial to the growth of good poetry.

There is no chance that the world will ever roll back, or even remain stationary. But with poetry and other intuitive arts, the case is quite different. The material or intellectual refinement, in the realm of these arts may help to bring about the mechanical development but does that mean real progress? The poetry of Pope essentially lacks the genuine charm of imaginative quality-the inevitable trait of poetry. It is not fascinating in this manner, however, attractive its mechanical flow may be. Here the refinement is to be noticed but it is not without the touch of artificial language about it. The introduction of philosophy, psychology and analytical attitude is still worse but the enlightened age must be philosophical and analytical. Philosophy and the analysis help the evolution of better theories but these make worse poems. The poet has to paint a picture of life, and if he tries to be analytical, surely he will be unnatural, we may tolerate faith or no faith but dissection is no poetry. Analysis, we see, kills the very essence of poetry, but the fact remains that a poet can be analytical whereas an analyst cannot be a poet in the real sense of the word. The contention, that refinement is the bane of poetry, is again ruled out by illustrations from poetry in general.

The progress of poetry in rude age, then needs, a further explanation. The illusion that poetry produces may be compared, in a borrowed simile, to a magic lantern in dark. The dark ages are there in which the "natural unsoundness of mind" is best suited for the appreciation of real poetry. The extent of abnormality and the intensification of emotion are at their best in the rude state of society. We can take up the intensity of emotions exercised by the romantic poets. Byron's fiery passion, Keat's sensuous disposition or Shelley's ethereal flights are actions of no ordinary heat or intensity and the full-throated expression that is born out of this extremism is real poetry representing a rude age. As we begin to judge and compare rather than create, this intensity of emotion is on the decline and so is poetry. It does not remain unadulterated and undiluted.

Examine the literature of any country, and we will find that the greatest works of intuitive art furnished in the darkest ages constitute the greatest form of poetry. Similar is the case with certain scriptures in verse. Poetry has been a favourite pastime in those good old scientific periods and out of these rude practices of the uncivilized man, were born certain immortal pieces of literature. The influence of these arts was also wonderful. Think of an Indian musician harnessing nature through his melodies, the civilized community will laugh it off in their own critical fashion quite neglecting the creative side of the whole thing. In his criticism of Dante, Macaulay asserts that these original works of art were not, appreciated

even in their own rude times. But anyhow the creation is there, whereas in the civilized state criticism is of a destructive nature.

Before endeavoring to differ with Macaulay's belief, it is relevant to refer to Kenneth Richmond's view about poetry in the dark ages. He is referring to the Anglo-Saxons when he says that even their battles had enough of poetry. Into the fray they ran, shouting and singing. At such times their very weapons made music, spears yelled, bows screamed and arrows sang. To the primitive mind everything was instinct with life and purpose and therefore, highly expressive. The contents of their songs would have been genuine poetry. Among those primitive people spontaneous eloquence flourished. Poetry, then, was the expression and possession of every man. The lofty strain of the music had natural high seriousness and intense melancholy; and the makers of the lofty strains were ordinary people who had the curiosity of a child to look at things. Their animist child mentality as such as to endow on stalks and stones with strange power of their ingeniousness they wrapped the simpler subjects with an all pervading mystery and impressiveness. The pigeon hole classification was unknown and so it could deal everyday affairs in a free and unshackled expression. It does not mean that Saxon poetry was rich or rare but on the other hand, the crude emotional stimulus which it presented, had a relish about it. Criticism was unknown. Today we are not in a position to feel the essential thrill of poetry but in the past it possessed vitality and in a real way it must have been far more intimate, and closer to the life of every man than is the cold touch of the Twentieth Century. Their art was primarily intuitive, and not intellectual. Cynewulf's poetry might be instinct with actuality and straightforward statement of facts, but it is better than Tennyson's dream world, which is the unreal creation of the poet's mind. The latter might be more studied, more artistic, more intellectualised but in his subjective poetry was really better than Cynewulf's with his objective approach, "Tennyson", says Kenneth Richmond, "is far more finished, correct to hair breadth, toiled more precisely, yet he lacks what Cynewulf possesses-"rightness, authenticity." Whereas in its original expression poetry was by the people for the people, later it became more isolated in manifestation gradually. This may be taken as one form of its decline. This is one view but Macaulay proves the decline by quite a different approach. He holds the view that as men know more and think more, look less at individuals and more at classes they give better theories and more poems. But modern poets would like to cut across the present stratification of public taste-stratification which, to him, is a sign of social disintegration. Macaulay thinks that poetry has declined because it has ceased to be the expression of the individualistic attitude of the modernist. Anyway, whatever the nature of this controversy may be, the fact

remains that the enlightened age has not enhanced the beauty of poetry. The ancient poets drew inspiration from the soil; the Renaissance poets were inspired by aristocratic and academic channels. So naturally poetry became unpopular in the modern age and lost its universality. Cooking or smoking a cigarette are the themes too unpoetic to be included in the works of real poetry.

So far we have seen the positive side of the whole affair, now let us take up the other side of the picture. Poetry does not decline and this view is held by most of those who are impressionists. Macaulay's statement can be doubted because of its hurried generalization. It is only the emphasis that shifts; the change of outlook does not mean a change for the worse. Poetry has not declined in the romantic period, because it was in the rude tradition which Macaulay holds the test of good poetry. Now in the 18th century also the scope was limited, but the decline was nowhere noticeable. Everything that happens brings a new subject for poetry-the mechanical age has given poems like the Assent of Fu Six (Aeroplane). Poetry may become compartmentalised but it can adopt attitude in its own way. The primitive man might have been struck with wonder when he just beheld the stars but the modern cannot feel like that.

In the end instance what an artist produces, is the work of inspiration. Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Goethe and Browning were born in the enlightened ages and yet, their contribution is ever new. Cathevil asserts that it may indeed be impossible for the 19th century to produce a Homer but it would have been quite impossible for Homer's age to produce a Shakespeare or a Goethe. The atmosphere of the age might give the artist an outlook never known before. An inspired artist can certainly write great poetry because he will not be touched by the spirit of the large class of people who cannot remain unaffected by the scientific outlook. Milton's greatness lies in his creative energy. It is not owing to the enlightened age he lived in.

To sum up we agree with Cathevil that, "It is, of course, true that poetry does not necessarily flourish with the progress of science, but it is false that it necessarily decays. It stands under other laws of development. So, the thesis of Macaulay needs modification."