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The summum bonum of style

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Abstract

'A thing of beauty is joy forever' was said by Keats. Beauty can be understood as perfection and perfection can be achieved through a particular manner or style. The style in writing is a perfect harmony between thought and expression. Every writer has his own style and way of using words i.e. diction to convey his idea. Tagore and Eliot have mystified the spiritual substance through their choicest words. Arnold observed that Nature herself seems to take the pen out of his hand and write for him with her own power. Arnold stated this because Wordsworth spoke of high things in most glorious style. There is soul in his style. The dejected outburst of Shelley, "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed" is the excellent example of blend of emotions and expression which creates a touching impact on readers.

The present paper throws light on the different perspectives of style. As style is the craftsmanship and artistic design of a language where several tools like satire, pathos, bathos, climax as well as rhythm, tone etc. are used and thus the enrichment of style is attained. When there is identification of writer and reader, this is the most sublime state.

Keywords: Style, beauty, perfection, harmony, nature, thought and expression

Introduction

Once Oscar Wilde was speaking to a group of litterateurs when he composed the epigram that no book is moral or immoral. He went on to say in a jocular mood that books are either written well or written badly. Wilde was in a mood of levity when he conceived his deeper meanings in the epigram. The epigram is true in so far as even books without substance have survived the judgment of time because they excel in what is called literary style or craftsmanship. Style is certainly an art. It presupposes skill in the manipulation of an instrument. This is implicit in its origin. It is derived from the Latin word 'Style', an instrument for writing on wax tablets. From this, style has come to mean the art of writing as distinguished from the matter that is written.

Right from the time of Plato the question has been frequently raised as to whether style can be differentiated from the substance or the matter expressed. Plato was never far from the truth when he considered Beauty or Perfection to be the result of a perfect synthesis between appearance and reality, between form and substance, between the body and the soul. From this, we have the logical deduction that if the writer has really anything to communicate he will decipher the right language to express it. In this view, style is inevitable. Style is born of inspiration and its creation is spontaneous. All idealist thinkers have held this view and the evidence of the poets seem to confirm it. Arnold interjected in his famous judgement on Wordsworth, "Nature herself seems to take the pen out of his hands and write bare, sheer, penetrating power": (Essays in Criticism, p.65)

Ever since the days of Aristotle there have been critics who had held the view that style is an art and further its achievement is a conscious process. Umpteen poets and prose-writers have been known to tinker with their composition even for years. They have altered, omitted, substituted their composition to reach a level of complacency. Some of our best stylists like John Keats or Gustave Falubert have been conscious artists in words and they have achieved perfection as a sculptor does by taking infinite pains over their works. Every reader of English literature is mesmerized by Keats expression in the concluding lines of Ode to a Nightingale:

Charmed magic casements opening on the foam. (ll.70-71,p.313)
Of perilous seas and fairy lands forlorn.

The reader is bewitched while reading the lines of Tagore's Gitanjali in as much as Yeats was bewitched. 'Entering my heart unbidden even as one of the common crowd, unknown to me, my king, thou didst press the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment.' (Gitanjali, p.25) As the reader reads these lines he has the impression that a perfect synthesis has been achieved between idea and expression. Gitanjali is a saga of mysticism. But what endears the reader to this wonderful lyric is the poet's ability to weave his mystical experience with lines that embrace mythology and tradition:

Beautiful is thy wristlet, decked with stars and cunningly wrought in myriad coloured jewels. But more beautiful to me thy sword with its curve of lightning like the outspread wings of the divine bird of Vishnu, perfectly poised in the angry red light of the sunset. (p.34-35)

Tagore's mystical inkling of the Ultimate is rendered through his sensuous imagery, at once eye-catching and poignant in its lyrical exuberance. The poet imagines God as a thirsty traveller Who exclaims – "Ah I am a thirsty traveller." The poet registers his sense impressions thus:

I started up from my day – dreams and poured water from my jar on thy joined palms. The leaves rustled overhead; the cuckoo sang from the unseen dark, and perfume of babla flowers came from the bend of the road.

In modern poetry T.S. Eliot's versification is characterized with variety and flexibility. His sensitivity to changes in mood is crystal clear and his rhythm is wonderfully modified to reflect this change. The Waste Land is certainly a music of ideas. In the first section of The Waste Land, the Burial of the Dead, we find a formal rhythm of Tiresias' meditation. They are in sharp contrast with the light and colloquial rhythms of the conversation of Marie with her male companion. In the second section entitled A Game of Chess we see the poet's use of grand majestic slow moving lines. They are in sharp contrast with the broken lines consisting of nervous ejaculations of the lady which follow close on the heels of the game of chess. The slow moving majestic rhythm descends to the ballad-like simplicity in the passage dealing with Mrs. Porter and her daughter, who wash their feet in soda water. The ironic sense of contrast is thus conveyed in the action of Mrs. Porter. The song of the hermit – thrush closely echoes the fall of water: 'Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop. (Waste Land, p.65)

There are different kinds of music: the song of the Thames daughter; the water dropping song of the hermit thrush; the music echoing through the pulsating streets of London day after day where the dead sound of a Church clock mingles with the pleasant whining of a mandoline. When the poem was germinating in the mind of the poet, he had already immersed himself in the Wagnerian opera.

In the hands of the masters of poetry like Tagore and Eliot there is perfect fusion of form and content. But the reverse is also often true and an impression is created that the writer is trying to conceive his lack of substance by taking pains over his style. This is evinced in the poems of the Pre-Raphaelite poet A.G. Swinburne. In his long poems like Atlanta in Calydon and Songs before Sunrise, the poet makes the

reader sway with the labyrinthine melodies of his verse in which the sound exceeds the sense.

Perhaps it will help us to reach the basic principle if we try to analyze the process through which a litterateur passes when he is building up his style. The writer has the desire to communicate his ideas. When an idea originates in his mind, it becomes operative when an inspiration is sufficiently powerful to establish a commanding influence on the mind of the writer or poet. He then tries to find the exact words that can express his idea almost as he had experienced it. Who can forget the memorable lines of Wordsworth's poem The Solitary Reaper?

I, listened motionless and still
And as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore
Long after it was heard no more (ll. 29-32, p.263)

The degree of perfection in this will depend upon the extent of approximation between idea and expression. The poet or writer may have an illusion if he does not have adequate powers of self-criticism that an adequate degree of approximation has been reached. This is evinced in the concluding lines of Keats' poem, *Ode to a Nightingale*:

Was it a vision or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: do I wake or sleep? (ll.80-81, p.314)

But the test of approximation between idea and expression is felt in its effect on the reader's mind as poet Alexander Pope states: 'the reader is hurried out of himself by the force of the poet's imagination'.

Here we see the question of the reader's identification with the writer. To put it plainly, the reader must feel himself identified with the poet or writer or at least raised by his passion to an identical state of mind. It is true that with some this condition of identification is realized with comparative ease; words come to him and position themselves with fluency. For instance, when the readers read the dejected outburst of the poet Shelly in Ode to the West Wind, O, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed! (ll.53-54, p.318) they are able to identify themselves with the state of despondency of the poet. With other poets, the nature of identification is a painful process. A struggle and a wrestling with himself this is the secret of style.

We may wish to define style as the artistic pattern of language which an idea assumes, in order to express or communicate itself. We cannot expect a true stylist to be a soloist. The true stylist is always in a state of social communication with others. The expression of the stylist is in direct proportion to his audience. The larger his audience the more lucid and intelligent he has to be. The euphuist who wrote 'you are telling me a fairy tale in place of you are telling me a lie' wrote solely for the delight of his own particular circle. Stylists in all ages take recourse to twists and turns of phrases and epithets. By their careful manipulation of words and phrases, they create a specialized idiom meant for a select audience. What makes language difficult of comprehension is neither superiority in learning nor depth in thought of the writer. Language becomes difficult to comprehend when the poet or writer is trying to create an effect or produce an impression. This leads to

mannerisms and artificial tricks of language. All these mannerisms and tricks of language are curiosities of style not its essence.

The object of the writer's communication is essentially artistic and not scientific. The poet or writer's object of communication is to give pleasure and not knowledge. A writer discharges his mind to the reader rather than imparts his mind. We must do well to remember that the object of communication of knowledge is only incidental on the part of the writer. Hence, style is an art. As an art, style belongs to literature which is considered as an art. It is known to all that language passes from mere expression or exposition to literature. The question of style arises only when language undergoes this transition. Rene Wellek expresses aptly the relation between language and literature in his book, *Theory of Literature*:

The relation between language and literature, one must never forget is the dialectical relation; literature has profoundly influenced the growth of language. (*Theory of Literature*, p.34)

The artist is entrusted with an onerous responsibility: his responsibility is to find the exact word and word relation that fits into his pattern. When the artist does not have the world at his disposal, he takes recourse to creating or borrowing or assimilating. The language which the artist uses develops a style only when the needs of literary expression has compelled the artist to augment the resources of language but the raw material of style is words and the artist takes recourse to developing his style by assimilating words from foreign sources. In this connection, we must remember that English owes its expressiveness to its extensive borrowings from sundry sources – Teutonic and Celtic, Latin and Greek, European and Oriental languages. Modern Russian has assimilated works from foreign sources the popular Russian speech has been re-enforced by church Slavonic, Gallicism and Teutonism. Of the Indian languages, perhaps Bengali has borrowed most from foreign sources. This accounted for the phenomenal progress of the Bengali language in the nineteenth century. It is by extensive assimilation that the writer enriches his style.

From this we deduce first that style depends upon an extensive vocabulary. That vocabulary is drawn from many sources and often created under the growing stress of cultural expansion. Secondly, style depends upon the proper use of words, epithets, and terms of expression, which have an association. This association with words and phrases stir memories of past usage. Thirdly, the words must be used in a rhythmic pattern. That rhythmic pattern is designed in such a way that it echoes the rhythm of the moving emotion. Every stylist confirms to his own peculiar rhythm. This rhythm accords with his own particular emotional complex. Finally the stylist has to depend upon a judicious use of figures of speech. This is necessary in order to regulate the pitch of the emotion. The writer takes recourse to hyperbole, climax, metaphor etc, to produce an intensifying effect on the minds and hearts of its readers. When the stylist desires to minimize the effect of the emotion he freely uses euphemism, pathos, sarcasm and the like. The stylist can also create a challenging effect through anti-thesis, epigram or paradox.

Walter Pater was the first critic to write on the subject of style. His essay on style found a place in *Appreciations*.

While defining style, Pater echoed the views of Longinus. Pater held the sense of fact to be the subject of fine art. After doing so, Pater proceeded to examine how style can be presented in all its warmth to the reader. The writer's means of doing so Pater says, are three: diction, design, and personality. So far as diction is concerned the writer uses a vocabulary which is faithful to the colour of his own spirit. The writer in his opinion, must not use obsolete or worn-out words but rather use current words which have not been blunted by constant misuse.

The next requirement of style is a combination of words into a unified whole. It is not just a series of sentences, held together by their common purpose but an architectural design. In this Pater underscores the need of the writer's mind in style. It is the work of the mind to combine word with word, phrase with phrase, sentence with sentence, part with part till they become one whole and one with the subject. We observe some similarities between the design of the composition with the Aristotelian plot which has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Pater not only shows his care for words and their unity of design he also shows the importance of warmth and colour. Here Pater shows the necessity of the third factor, personality or soul in style. It is the very breath of the writer in his work.

The question of craftsmanship arises here. And we must do well to remember that a stylist is a craftsman over and above. He has his raw materials and his tools of trade near or about him. With all his tools about him, the artist builds his style with varying degrees of enthusiasm; sometimes that enthusiasm is marked with energy and passion; sometimes it moves slowly, laboriously, conscientiously, even painfully. The process is not all that matters but it is the final effect that matters the most. In this we consider the architectural design or the synthetic form of the work of art. It may be cold and austere, a graceful attitude, fixed and monumental. It may be something vital and animated. The craftsmanship is such that it may sweep the reader along or drive him forward with irresistible power. The craftsmanship may come as a vital force or a challenge for minute consideration.

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