

The Nature and Function of Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry speaks to us with a specific language the immediate object of which is neither narration nor performance; it is a different language made to express our thoughts and emotions as the word 'poetry' itself implies creating insight. Poetry is equipped with vehicles that disrupt our familiarized perception of reality in order to visualize the most nontransferable emotions. The object of this paper is to uncover these elemental aspects of poetry and later discuss three different functions/voices observable in its history: moral/social, expressive and nonrepresentational. These three phases of poetry mark the challenging nature of poetry as received both by writers and readers.

Keywords: Poetry, rhythmic discourse, metaphor, moral function, expressive function, nonrepresentational function.

نقش و ماهیت شعر

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چکیده

شعر با زبانی خاص با ما صحبت می‌کند که رویکرد روایتی یا نمایشی ندارد؛ زبان شعر زبانی است که برای بیان احساسات و افکار به کار می‌رود همان‌طور که خود واژه شعر نیز به معنای بصیرت و شناخت است. شعر به عناصری مجهز است که می‌تواند دریافت ما را از واقعیت آشنایی‌زدایی نماید تا به این وسیله مفاهیم و احساسات غیرقابل بیان قدرت انتقال یابند. هدف این مقاله بررسی ابعاد ساختاری شعر است که زبان آن را از سایر انواع ادبی جدا می‌سازد. سپس این مقاله به تحلیل سه نقش مهم شعر انگلیسی در طول تاریخ آن خواهد پرداخت: نقش اخلاقی/اجتماعی، بیانی و غیربازنمودی. این سه نقش در طول تاریخ شعر بیانگر ماهیت پویا و چالشگر شعر است که خواننده و نویسنده هر دو را تحت‌الشعاع قرار می‌دهد. کلیدواژه‌ها: شعر، گفتمان آهنگین، استعاره، نقش اخلاقی، نقش بیانی، نقش غیربازنمودی.

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'Every word was once a poem... Language is fossil poetry'. Emerson

Introduction

It is known that poetry has always been with us and is the earliest form of literature. Poetry was used to record history or it is better to say that history has been handed to us through some heroic songs whereby a nation's heroic deeds or feasts are transferred to us. Therefore, one can say that poetry has been the only literary expression that evolved with human expression and has developed ever since. The object of this article is first to discuss the nature of poetry as a distinct genre. Such a task obviously will challenge other genres such as novel and drama as it enables me to analyze distinct features of poetry such as language, metaphor, imagery and structure. The final section of the article demonstrates different aspects of poetry in terms of its function as a literary genre during literary history. This will hopefully enhance our understanding of poetry as we encounter the views of various poets from different backgrounds.

The nature of poetry

When we speak of poetry, certain features come to our minds that are either related to its form or to the kind of message it reveals. Poetry is a completely perfect form for conveying human emotions and sensations. No wonder this has led to the conviction that poetry is associated with emotions and feelings or that it is pretentious, artificial and thus unrealistic. Such convictions form certain expectations and therefore definitions in the mind of its readers. Moreover, rhythm is recognized as an integral part of poetry and this element has added to the convictions I have just mentioned. Therefore, explaining the exact nature of poetry and the elements which make it distinct from other forms of literature become essential.

When we speak of poetry certain features come to our minds that are related to its form. These formal features characterize something which is more or less referred to as verse. Poetry and verse are often used synonymously. Technically speaking, however, verse is applied to a rhythmic and rhymed discourse. On the other hand, poetry is used for a discourse suggesting a vision, a certain image wrapped up in emotions and feelings that is not necessarily rhymed. The etymology of the word also offers more clues toward its meaning. The word *poet* means maker and the *poet* is a 'maker', a person who has obtained access to the world of truth (Ideas). In the Persian language, the word poetry (*š'ar*) also originates from the word *š'o'ur* meaning perception or insight. And the poet is someone who attempts to reveal a vision, a perception of reality. Therefore, from an etymological point of view, poetry is more than a rhymed discourse as it is equipped with a highly subjective language to express human thoughts and feelings.

This introductory note clarifies the distinction between verse and poetry and alternately leads us to our discussion of poetry as a genre. One of the ways to

reveal the nature of poetry is to see what fundamental features distinguish it from other literary genres such as the drama and the novel. In genre theory, the analysis of language and structure is essential as it studies the nature and uniqueness of a genre by establishing its structure and marking its language. I shall here begin with the novel. The distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre is *narration*, i.e., a story is being told. Although there is narrative poetry, narration is neither a major element nor the distinguishing feature of poetry. Unlike poetry and drama, in a novel events are described through a narrator. The narration, however, takes place through different levels and techniques. Sometimes the story is told through the first person point of view in which the reader feels the presence of the author. More frequently it is related through the third person point of view or the omniscient narrator whose authority is rather invisible. Whatever form the story is being narrated in and whatever effect it produces on the reader, the nature or, it is better to say, the language of novel is *narration* and its structure is prose. The other feature that plays a central role in the novel is characterization. "Authors often describe the experience of writing a novel as crucially linked with characterisation" (Atkin 1995:156). In other words, characterization is as important as narration. We might even suggest that not only characterization is part of narration, but it also forms the narration of the story. This is particularly true in the case of modern novelists such as Virginia Woolf whose novels portray the minds of characters through the stream consciousness technique.

Completely different from the novel, the language of drama is that of *performance*. The nature of drama is based on action or as Aristotle defined it 'imitation of action'. Drama (as it was originally) is meant to be seen and heard rather than read. We should go further than this by suggesting that drama comes to life in action. In fact, it is being written in (during) performance. Drama "as a written text" is not powerful enough in presenting some dramatic techniques effectively. Features such as soliloquy, silence or stage direction can be felt intensely in performance. Furthermore, as Graham Atkin maintains, in the semiotics of drama, non-verbal elements or, as they are called, non-verbal signifiers such as noise, lighting, costume, mask, make-up, gesture, music, properties and set-design are considered as multimedial aspects of theatrical performance which cannot be neglected (Atkin 1995: 185). Therefore, the reader (the supposed audience) has to imagine the whole situation of the play in his mind. This is especially important in the case of Elizabethan drama or even that written before where readers are relatively unfamiliar with the culture of the time as well as the intention of the writers. This feature of drama explains modern adaptations and different performances of these plays. As such, with these plays, the reader definitely has to visualise the situation and characters. Just as words play an important role in poetry, performance/ action is vital to drama; poetry should be read out but drama should be watched. Therefore, the audiences of drama through their understanding of a play bring it to life. This

point can be emphasized especially in the case of absurd drama. In terms of structure, dialogue is its distinguishing feature though dialogue can also be used in other literary forms. Nothing is narrated in drama, rather, everything is directly said, that is, everything is acted out by the actors/characters. Here again, even though there is a kind of poetry called dramatic monologue, dialogue or performance is not a distinct feature that creates poetry.

Totally different from the novel and drama, the language of poetry is the language of *rhythm*. This is so because "[P]oetry speaks to each of us at another level, below our consciousness. Like music, it reaches inside to touch us" (Paschen xi). Rhythm is a combination of accented and unaccented syllables that in scansion are designated by signs. Any kind of poetry whether narrative, lyric, pastoral or epic has some rhythmic language. The power of poetry lies in its rhythm. This is so because rhythm intensifies our emotions and likewise affects the feelings of its reader. Whether traditional or free verse, rhythm is essential to poetry. Meter and stanza divisions are also structural features of poetry rather than any other genre. Rhyme is also considered as a special but not a distinct feature of poetry. In other words, there are many poems that do not have rhymed lines; they do they follow a specific stanza division either as in the case of free verse. Nevertheless, they are still recognized as examples of poetry, the best examples of which can be taken from modern poetry.

Of other elements that are essential to the nature of poetry is metaphor. Metaphor as a figure of speech can be seen both in prose and verse. However, metaphor in poetry serves as its specific language and this gives it an important role. Metaphor seeks to identify similarities in apparently dissimilar things. It is for this reason that Aristotle compares the imaginative art of analogy to the power of mimesis, "art in a way is a metaphor for nature" (Holman 1986:298). Therefore, we can say that metaphor is not just a figure of speech that conveys an elaborate resemblance. Metaphor is more than a decorative language for poetry. In fact, it is a means (perhaps we should say it is the only means) by which reality is represented in poetry. In the early stages of civilization, the borderline between poetic and literal truth is not easily defined, since artistic forms of discourse are transferred through a symbolic language. The primitive paintings of caves, for instance, both describe and interpret the reality of the outside world. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between the levels of discourse. That is what Shelley meant, in *A Defence of Poetry*, when he claimed that 'in the youth of the world' all discourse in a sense was poetry:

Their (primitive men's) language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (Daiches 1981:5)

Ordinary language and, according to structuralist critics, language itself cannot represent reality let alone the truth. By means of metaphor and other metaphoric techniques such as metonymy, conceit or synecdoche, poetic language achieves a new function. It enables the poet to break our constructed apprehension of reality in order to offer us a new way of seeing as in the case of Renaissance poetry where metaphor is neither sensual nor artificial. As an example, Terence Hawkes argues, a lady's face is not described in terms of a garden because of a physical resemblance; it is rather the association of physical beauty with the Garden of Eden. Therefore, for the Elizabethan poet, metaphor represents an act of ordering imposed on Nature (Daiches 1981: 19-20). By this imaginative analogy, the poet almost defamiliarizes the reality surrounding us. And that is why Aristotle argues that art is in a way metaphoric as it disrupts our familiarized perception of reality. In structuralism, language is the realm of signs the meanings of which depend on a complex set of structural relations. Therefore, we may say that metaphor signifies poetry. In other words, the language of poetry receives signification by the power of metaphor. A good instance of such a language is John Donne's 'Canonization':

We can die by it, if not live by love,
 And if unfit for tombs and hearse
 Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
 And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
 As well a well-wrought urn becomes
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
 And by these hymns, all shall approve
 Us canonized for love....

Finally, we reach the role of imagery in poetry. Imagery is as substantial an element as metaphor. Compared to other genres such as the novel and drama, imagery plays an important role in poetry. Structurally speaking, poetry is a very short and concise genre. A poem accumulates all the thoughts and emotions of a poet, that might have possibly engaged him during a long period of time, and transfers it then the reader through a single structure and a very concise form. It seems as if the poet has frozen all his/her experiences into one single time and space called a 'poem'. It is in this sense that imagery becomes very significant both in the formation of poetry and its meaning. An image is a picture that the poet creates in his poem. As such, an image is not simply a decorative tool in the hands of the poet with which to merely embellish his poetry. The visual image portrayed in a poem makes the abstract concept of the poet's mind understandable and visualized. Furthermore, imagery is a kind of trope and one of the figurative languages. Therefore through imagery the poet describes, compares, and identifies a concept in his mind with an object in order to express an idea that is not expressible in literal language. As discussed before, because of the concise framework of poetry, the poet uses a specific

language, structure and techniques in order to be effective. In the novel or drama, imagery may be used so extensively that it becomes a dominant motif. However, in poetry image is a central and essential element. Like metaphoric language, image forms and gives a shape to the mind of the poet. As such, without imagining and understanding the image of a poem that is formed through each line, one can not understand the poem. In this connection, one can compare poetry with painting. Just like poetry, a piece of painting holds unity and a single frame. And very similar to the lines of a poem, each stroke of the brush and any detail in any corner of the picture speak of a feeling or an idea. A very good evidence for this is the close relation between poetry and painting during the Renaissance period:

We may note that it is across this same period that there occurs the elaboration of the doctrine of *'ut pictura poesis'*, in which the protocols of narrative painting are to be derived from literary models. We may see, therefore, that both poetry and painting sought in the other the means to correct its own insufficiency: in the one case an insufficiency of image, in the other an insufficiency of narrative. (Pacteau 1994: 205)

Imagery in poetry might have different effects or functions. Sometimes the poet works on the beauty of the image as is the case in Christopher Marlowe's 'Hero and Leander' where the narrative of eroticism is beautifully projected through the amorous plotting of mythological gods:

The outside of her garments were of lawn,
The lining purple silk, with gilt stars drawn;
Her wide sleeves green, and bordered with a grove
Where Venus in her naked glory strove
To please the careless and disdainful eyes
Of proud Adonis, that before her lies;
Her kirtle blue, whereon was many a stain,
Made with the blood of wretched lovers slain.
Upon her head she ware a myrtle wreath,
From whence her veil reached to the ground beneath.
Her veil was artificial flowers and leaves,
Whose workmanship both man and beast deceives...

'Hero and Leander'

More often the image serves a thematic role. One of the good examples of modern poetry is T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' where strong images build up the meaning of the poem:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question...
 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

In the very first stanza, the descriptions of the evening as an etherized patient laid on the table, half-deserted streets, muttering retreats etc. defamiliarize the usual situation of a love poem for the reader. What we as readers expect from a love poem is averted by the very title of the poem, the name of the lover, the unusual metaphors and generally the overwhelming situation of the poem. Briefly speaking, the metaphor of etherization implies the theme of the poem as the images of inactivity, release from pain, escape and futility are pictured in the mind.

The function of poetry

Having discussed the nature of poetry through an analysis of its distinguishing features, I shall treat different aspects of poetry in terms of function. During the history of English literature, poetry held different functions due to the fact that poets maintained different opinions in order to justify their poetry to the readers/society. In fact, poetry served to fulfill a variety of objectives for poets. Furthermore from a literary point of view, the status of poetry has never been static. This means that different readers support and challenge poetry. During the history of English literature, other genres such as the novel and drama have competed with poetry. Therefore, this functional aspect of poetry makes the problem of offering a definite definition for the nature of poetry more difficult than ever. In discussing function for poetry, we may find three stages where poetry obtained certain social functions. And each function thereby affects the nature that poets defined for their readers.

The first function is a moral one. Under the influence of Plato, the moral aspect of poetry was dominant in English literature for a long period of time. For Plato, literature in general and poetry in particular were to be discarded by society for two reasons. On the one hand, literature was merely a representation of reality and this made it far from the Idea (truth). Therefore, for Plato such a false representation of reality/truth was not reliable. On the other hand, this representational and false picture of reality was immoral and corrupted the minds of the youth. These two dimensions of philosophy and morality that rejected literature established, however, two essential issues in art and literature. Any discussion related to the nature and practice of poetry continued to be influenced by Plato's theories of literature for centuries. In fact, these two dimensions are so deeply established that even many notions and convictions different from Plato's have also utilized the same moral function for poetry. The best example we can refer to would be Aristotle whose monumental defense of poetry appears in his *Poetics*. He argued that the

mimetic (representational) picture of reality is not only reliable but also reflects a heightened reflection of reality. Poets enable us to see the truth through their power of imagination. This is because imagination for Aristotle is a divine, spiritual faculty rather than simply fancy. Likewise, he finds any adaptation or reflection of such heightened reality instructive and pleasant. Aristotle's theory of catharsis prescribes a moral function for poetry. Through catharsis, he maintains, readers' emotions and feelings are purged.

Later on in the sixteenth century Renaissance, when there is a tendency to return to classical models and ideals, the same function of poetry continues. The Renaissance, as a movement that attempts to build a new outlook towards humanity with reference to the classics, challenges new directions of civilization. Nevertheless, it seems that Renaissance poets used the same framework and function for poetry despite their defensive and idealistic approach. Sidney's poetry and his major critical treatise, *The Defense of Poesy*, define poetry as an art that speaks metaphorically and represents a speaking picture that is not literal. Modifying Aristotle, Sidney argued that the representation of art is a 'golden' one, that is, a heightened version of reality: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers...; her world is brazen, the poets deliver only a golden" (Abrams 1986: 507). To continue the moral function of poetry, Sidney stresses that poetry should teach and delight. Therefore, the nature of Renaissance poetry is idealistic in its portrayal of reality and has some moral convictions to teach. Such poetry was greatly supported by the courtiers of the time.

This status of poetry survives well into the eighteenth century though it takes a social tone together with moral as well. In the Augustan age, poetry is an important genre where the practice of poetic diction is standardized. In fact, the language of poetry is utilized to convey moral values and principles of the Augustan society, a society in which nature, reason, order, logic, harmony, utility, restrained emotion etc. are the keywords. Pope's famous phrase, 'nature methodized' in his *Essay on Criticism* best recapitulates the spirit of the time. As they admire common sense, civility and refined taste, the moral/social tone of poetry manifests the taste of the middle class.

In its second phase, poetry receives a new function and moves away from its social/moral function. This new status of poetry gives it not only a new definition but also a new language and structure. Under the influence of the Romantic movement, the language and structure of poetry undergoes a dramatic change. The vast changes of the nineteenth century social revolutions prefigured a new function since poetry no longer received by a certain class of the society, nor was it a medium to transfer moral and social values of the society. Poetry became individualized. Here man and his position in the universe is not the central subject of poetry anymore. Instead, there emerged a new interest in human nature where his soul and sensibility, primitive laws of

nature, common life and ordinariness dominate the subject of poetry. In this connection, we can refer to Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* that has almost become the manifesto of the Romantic movement. According to Wordsworth, "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Abrams 1986: 163-4). Not only did human emotions and feelings give a new perspective to the nineteenth century perception of the universe, but they also created a subjective mode in poetry. Obviously, the new mode of poetry needed a language and a structure that could affect its readers. Such subjectivity formed the inspirational and expressive function for poetry. The poet was not concerned with the moral message of his poetry neither was he concerned with his readers. Therefore, the social function of poetry that had been dominant for centuries was replaced by a totally opposite mode.

Finally in the twentieth century, poetry is the genre that has come to challenge new horizons. Modern poetry is a kind of poetry that is not social despite the fact that it has witnessed more social and cultural changes in its time than any other period. And this gives poetry a paradoxical function! The third phase of English poetry does not contradict the previous one. As a matter of fact, it is a development or continuation of the second phase. Modern poetry is also a subjective poetry; nevertheless, it does not merely portray the individual's emotions and feelings. Therefore, as it involves the poet's intellect as well as his feelings, modern poetry moves beyond expressive function. Moreover, under the influence of art for art's sake, poetry finds a different voice. The new status of poetry challenges the social, moral or philosophical objectives. Modern poetry attempts to substitute religion and philosophy with the perspective of art, just as art challenged history in the time of Plato. For T. S. Eliot, the most well known poet of the twentieth century, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not expression of personality but an escape from personality" (Abrams 1986: 2299). In addition to this self-denying aspect of poetry, Eliot contributes the element of tradition, that is, a poetry that has a perception of its time and conscious of a real sense of history. T. S. Eliot's poetry is only an example of poetry that does not and cannot endorse a moral, social or even expressive voice in poetry. In fact, modern poetry does not have a single voice; it is a poetry that denies its readers by being involved in its own representation.

Conclusion

As the final word, we might say that poetry can not be defined in a single phrase since its nature and function varies for different poets at different times. Furthermore, this variety is a matter of the reader's response rather than a structural concern. In other words, poets have tried to write in response to certain needs (of readers) that actually address major elements of poetry. In terms of structure and language, poetry has always utilized certain features that

were discussed in this article. Metaphor, imagery and rhythm have always been fundamental in the formation of poetry and have always been its distinguishing language.

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