

The Poet on the Overdrive: The Mystery of the Poetic Moment

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Abstract

How far away and how close is poetry to intentional lying and how poetic lies [lie-cense] pass off as an ornament is the subject of this study. What is termed and admired as exaggeration is nothing but the extension or intension of reality. Poetry, in a way, is never a surface statement. Whatever it says, is never explicit. It uses metaphors and symbols which either extend on the real feeling, or under present the same. Thus, the unreal becomes an extended element of the real and poetry becomes a mix up of the two components. Who knows where the realm of the real ends and the domain of the unreal begins. Excitement, passion, anger, joy, ecstasy, crying, pining, sighing – all these living experiences are actually simple feelings added with a tinge of excitement and passion. A poet always overstates, or he understates, he is never normal. And, by the use of intentional over statements, which pass off as exaggeration, he is capable of creating an excited state in the mind of man. In the final analysis, a poem is the sum total of the real and the unreal and together it presents an experience which is intense. Can the poet be excused for telling intentional lies and provoking the readers into uncanny states?

Key words: Poetry, poetics, intension, extension, half-truths, oracle, unreal, real, a window to new dimensions

Turning Half-Truths into Oracles

Poetry is a conscious statement of an intensely passionate experience. Such experiences happen to almost every one, but only a poet can capture them in words and images, while others can only feel it and let it pass. To understand poetic creation, it would be appropriate to refer to the state of mind of a man who decides to commit suicide. He was living a normal life.

Something happens. And then, his mind creates situations which do not actually exist. Only his fears take various shapes and start masquerading before his eyes. A sense of deprivation overtakes him. Now, he is in the grip of suicidal passion. And he commits the act. The idea to be underlined here is that the reality was not so horrible as it was presented to him by a heightened state of mind.

This situation can be better explained by referring to the dagger episode in 'Macbeth' while Macbeth is in a heightened mental state before he murders Duncan, and finds a dagger hanging before him. The dagger which was at the most an illusion actually represented a poetic truth. This is what poetry does to the normal feelings of a man. It heightens them. Most of the time, this heightening of emotions and intensification of experience takes place at the expense of reality. Unreality extends the frontiers of normal experience, and it lends a sense of urgency to the fleeting thoughts. A moment arrives when the clouds fail to carry the water vapours, and rain sets in. This is how a poetic piece comes into being.

How the Poet Picks Up the Unreal

Lying comes naturally to a man in an inebriated state of mind, a domain in which poets usually operate. Come to think of a man who is drunk. How he presents reality is a clear evidence to show how a poet presents reality, as he is also in the same intoxicated state of mind. If one has to explain it in geographical terms, prose is the plains, but poetry is the mountainous region, where either one is going up, or jerking down. Both these states are unreal, because earth essentially is like a plain. Thus, plain language is not the cup of a poet's tea. Stimuli often propel his mind into a state where feelings cut deep into the heart, and he sees blood where actually there is none, and he dies and swoons, while being in a stable physical condition.

It follows therefore, that the unreal comes most naturally to the poet, who is either on the ninth cloud, or nowhere on earth. How could Wordsworth gather lessons in humanity from nature? All the poetry that Walt Whitman has written is a heightened state of passion. It is not to say 'lying' but 'over statement' or 'under statement'. The real has been either extended to match his vision, or intended. All the talk of moon, winds, waters, and all that the poets find them saying, falls on the wrong side of reality. Yet, everything is said, and accepted too, as a prophetic

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truth. This is the li[e]cense which poets enjoy. Whatever they say is no less than prophesy. They are physicians of an ailing society. They are the prophets. They see what ordinary eyes cannot envision. And they say what ordinary words cannot say. How they charge their words! How they change situations into archetypal moments! How they pick meanings from the dustbin of history and myth and recycle the truths in new makeovers! Just as trees take carbon dioxide and transform it into oxygen, poets too draw a parallel turning half-truths into oracles.

Poets are artists and artists are always selling something which otherwise is base material. From clay, which no one would buy, an artist prepares a face and a body, and it becomes Mariam or Christ. So, making involves a lot of extended values over the real. Similar is the case with a poet. For whom, ordinary happenings are spun into a new sentiment, and transformed into objects which carry much more significance than ordinary objects. What is real has always been a subject of philosophical debates. Still, the question remains unanswered as to what this world says is real or the real lies in that heightened state in which the poets and prophets operate.

In a poem, the words are not lying on the surface. [Pun intended on 'lying']. They have deeper roots. Like trees, they have invisible leaves. In these leaves, are living ghosts and fairies. Words have a life much more than their dictionary meaning. They are living beings with a mind of their own, a sensibility, a past and a present. A future too. They do not let anyone access their ultimate horizons. The deeper you delve, there is still more left to be discovered.

A word sends a man into a trance, and another man into a killer instinct. Looking into them is not easy. That is why, what poets say, always remains half-said. It is the uncanny wisdom and mischief mongering of words that poets can never be sure of what they are saying, and fearing this, they employ metaphors and images so that if not meaning, at least a state of mind could be conveyed directly.

All this creates a situation in which the real becomes a casualty and only the extended unreal or the under said becomes the poetic expression. Like a spider, the poet picks up from truths and half-truths and weaves a wonderful pattern of gossamer threads. Another analogy can be given from the children who take up a solution of soap and water and start making colourful

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and shapely bubbles and balloons by blowing their breath into a slender pipe of paper. The more soapy the solution, the more brilliant are the colours of the bubbles formed, and greater the joy of the innocent heart. Can one make colourful balloons from clean water?

Exaggeration as a Tool

As stated earlier, poetry is an exalted state of mind and such a state is brought about by an exaggerated sense of reality. A poet employs expressions which pick up the real and turn it upside down. A song too is a word said too loudly. This is how extraneous enters the sense of a word, and turns it more emphatic. Poetry is different from prose in that in a prose item, the writer builds up an idea and at the end, is able to say, hence, this is this. He is very precise. He knows what his words mean. There is no ambiguity. There is nothing left unsaid, or to chance.

Moreover, a prose writer knows already what he has to say. However, all these positives are absent from poetry. The poet does not say anything. He merely suggests. He is so skeptical of the words, that he doubts even himself with regard to the sense he has injected into them. In a poem, words are sense-resistant. They end up suggesting much more or far less than what the author had visualized. Moreover, it is not possible for a poet to work having a blue print, as a prose writer does.

Whereas a prose writer can start with a title, poetry defies such easy solutions. The poet does not know where the poem will meander, and what it will say, and how it will say, and whether it will say anything or not. This ambiguity and tentativeness of meaning, is the result of exaggeration which is at the heart of poetic creation.

A poet writes poetry out of a situation which does not even attract the attention of a common ordinary fellow. And then, while an ordinary man might look simply at the mathematics of life, the poet complicates the given situations, and tries to relate them to the essential questions of life and death, and thus, those very ordinary experiences start bearing a special significance and a meaning which is unspecific, vague but highly expansive.

The Poet versus the Man

Although the poet is also a man, but when a man turns into a poet, the man is left behind, and the passion to communicate takes over. Even the urge to talk requires a special urge over being silent. In this super state, the reader can be left confused because as a man, the poet might be a very prosaic person, leading a simple life of simple arithmetic, but as soon as the incorrigible passion takes over, he leaves behind that mortal domain, and enters orbit of the immortal. The vision changes. The world changes. In this state, a poet can tell his beloved that he can sacrifice everything for her sake. In this state, he can say, this is a seamless world, and he believes in no boundaries. It is this passion which makes him look into the life of things, which is possible only when the man stays behind and the prophet departs and moves on to a journey into the unknown. Keeping the two together is almost impossible because, it is like keeping the reality and the dream together. Real and the unreal together.

What he is telling in this state may not be true, it may seem true only to him, and only in that inebriated intoxicated state of mind, it is a momentary truth for the poet in that state. Otherwise, to him at other times, and to all others at all times, it might seem an inflated lie, and being charitable to him, an illusion at the most. Only the poet can tell his beloved that her face is like the moon in placid waters of the lake. These are innocent overstatements. Just like splashing of waters by a duck and creating patterns on the breast of a pond of water. It is merely a play, a game; even if lies, they make life more livable than it normally is. They are like cosmetics to a ravaged face.

Poetry brings shine on things which are otherwise prosaic. By spending words which does not involve any expenditure. And, thus they create a magical world for us, an unreal world, which is full of romance and mystery. It is this mystery which makes the poetry and its subject enchanting. Every object in this world is enchanting, and like a 'talisman', touch a stone and you find stairs descending down, or there appears a magical lake whose waters are frozen, and in the enchanted moonlight, we come across a girl with a dulcimer. It appears, every poet, like Coleridge, writes after an overdose of opium and all poetry is a re-rendering of Kubla Khan.

What a man lacks in his life? What we are ever after? Romance. Charm. Beauty. And all these things are the products of applying some cosmetics on reality. Are they really unreal? Are they lies? Is a woman who is well dressed and has a wonderful make-up, a living lie? I wonder, if we take her at her face value. Although it is her face value which really counts. We call her beautiful. We call her charming. That is our statement about her. Without going into whether she is overloaded with magical potions. What make up does to a woman, exaggeration does the same to a piece of poetry, makes it digestible, charming, and romantic, and more acceptable than it would have been otherwise. Thus, it is the poet who picks up unsuspecting people and takes them over to a journey into the magical realms of romance whose architect he himself is, and treats us to states which are ordinarily impossible to conceive, not to talk of entering.

Poet: A Window on New Dimensions

The poet, thus, takes us over to a new reality. Rather than calling it unreal, it would be better if it is called a new dimension. The Poet is a window on these new dimensions. Only he knows what he would show us of what he has perceived. Once we enter through this gate, now, it is a journey through the dark caves of his consciousness, and whatever lies [pun again] there. It may seem uncanny, it may seem magical, it may seem unwarranted, it might seem far removed from reality, because we are romance-resistant otherwise, and ordinary people who are treated to poetry, do not easily enter those gates. But once they are in, the muse takes over, and the magic is turned on. Then, they start moving their heads, along with the hair, they carry atop. It is magic thereafter.

The real job of the poet is not to state reality as it is, that is the job of the prose writer. The poet who is drunk on immortal juices, also injects those juices into his poetry, and a potion from the poet can send people into a trance, from which they do not like to return. Magic is an extension of reality. Charms are reality plus. It is more like a plane which moves some time on the pitch of life, and then, takes off. The poet is always sitting on that edge, rubs off his shoulders with reality, and then, takes off into realms unknown.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it can be inferred that poetry does not relate the real, but it spins its magic web around real situations, so that in poetry, they become unreal attachments. These magical webs enhance the value of poetry, but not without making it inaccessible in its totality. A piece of poetic creation defies simplistic methods of interpretation, and discovery of meaning. Rather, poetry brings forth innovative ideas because the words are radio-active and have a life of their own. They depend, for their meaning, neither on the poet, nor on the reader. They keep growing. It can be safely said that poetry is the art of over-saying things, and brought to the basics, a poetic creation is a mix up of the real and the unreal, and the unreal is mostly the imagination of the poet, making it mostly an exercise in 'airy nothings' which attain their prophetic value because they are a part of the poetic truth. The poet moves forward leaving the man behind, and turns into a window on new magical dimensions of experience.

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