Literature and the Aesthetic: From the Greek Age to Modern Age

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Many critics believe that "the very notion of the aesthetic" has "fallen victim to the success of recent developments within literary theory" (Joughin and Malpas 1). Some even "assume that in order to discuss the aesthetic value of a literary text one must treat it as an autonomous object and isolate it from non-literary values and disciplines" (Singer and Dunn 3). But this thinking has started changing. In the post-theory scenario, the aesthetic is back in literary studies and has stimulated varied kinds of debates (Barry 300-302).

The contention of this essay is that human interest in aesthetics can be traced far back in time. In fact, human beings share this interest, though with more developed taste, with animals, a fact admitted by Charles Darwin (O'Hear 9). With the passage of time, human beings refined it by developing varied forms of visual arts, music, and literature. Because of this, the connection between literature and the aesthetic has spanned centuries and has been vibrant and productive; it has also been theorised with varied degrees of sophistication by philosophers and literary critics from the Greek to modern times. This essay critically examines the significant intersections of this connection by focusing on the aesthetics of mimesis in Plato and Aristotle, the blend of beauty and delight in Horace, the sublime touch of Longinus, the lofty beauties of Plotinus, the mix of Plato and Horace in Sidney, the neo-classical aesthetics of the eighteenth century, the aesthetic push of Addison and Shaftesbury, the loftiness of German expressionism and the romantic aesthetic of the English romantics, the rise and fall of aestheticism, and the varied shades of modernist aesthetics. It also demonstrates that all along, except for a brief spell of pure aestheticism in Europe, England, and America, writers have used their energies not only to create beautiful works of art but also maintained a healthy connection with human values and societal concerns.

A well-known and widely commented upon observation about Plato is that "beauty plays a central role in his thought" (Wood 35) for which the key texts are *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. Interestingly, for both of them, and for his other major works as well, Plato chose the literary form of the dialogue that is truly poetic. Some scholars have examined the rhetorical and methodological bases for his choice of the form (Dorter 42-52). And some, like David Gallop, explain how that places Plato's work in the Greek poetic tradition: "In a culture where poetry was a long-established medium of intellectual discourse, where

public reading aloud was a normal mode of 'publication,' and where dramatic performance was competitive," Plato's choice of the dialogue allowed him to compete with the writers of his time on their own ground (54). However, Plato's concept of beauty is intimately linked with ethical and moral concerns, which is clarified in his major work on politics and power, *The Republic*. Though he recognizes the verbal, visual and other forms of art as sources of beauty, he values aesthetic pursuits and products only for their effect on human beings within an ideal political space.

Plato's views on beauty in art and its connection with the moral health of the readers are the major concerns of what Stephen Halliwell calls "the aesthetics of mimesis". Though the word mimesis occurs for the first time in the work of Aristophanes, who uses it in the sense of "dramatic impersonation" (Murray xvii), mimesis was developed into an elaborate theory of poetry by Plato, and figures in *The Republic*, in Books 3 and 10, in which he dwells on its effect on the citizens of an ideal state. A considerable divergence characterises these two books, both in the manner in which Plato conceives mimesis and the manner in which he deals with poetry. In Book 3, mimesis is equated with image-making and poetry is given considerable importance as a source of virtue. In Book 10, mimesis is used in the sense of reproduction, and poetry as a species of reproduction is debunked because it has no value. That is why commentators on Plato say that for him "poetry was extremely important and dangerous in its own right, and that he had a split attitude to it" (Annas 203).

According to Plato, mimesis is imitation by poets of the objects, events, and things, connected with the sensible world. In spite of being attractive, these do not come near the ideal world of forms. Because of this, Plato considers poets worthless imitators, whose creations are far removed from the ideal and the truthful (Plato, *The Republic* 335-341). Inbuilt in this is the view that the "philosopher comes closest to first-hand knowledge of reality: he can see the form or ideas or ideal form of things and can therefore disregard imitations" (Melberg 10), thus laying the basis of a contentious debate about the superiority of philosophers or poets, which has dominated philosophical and critical thinking for several centuries.

In another book, *Ion*, Plato argues that poets compose poetry in a state of divine frenzy, when they are out of their minds, and, therefore, far from the sobering influence of reason (Plato 4-7). Though the poets are inspired and provide pleasure by arousing emotions, these appeal only to base human instincts, and are, therefore, harmful for the moral health of human beings. Thus, both for the poverty of content of their work and its dangerous emotional impact on the readers, Plato is critical of the poets of his times. In spite of this, he still believes that poetry can have a place in his ideal commonwealth if it is written

by virtuous poets, as a source of education for the young. Plato wrote about poetry from a purely philosophical perspective, which makes his theory of poetry complex and even contradictory. What is significant though is that he raised some searching and vital questions about the connection between art, aesthetics, and values, which have dominated discussions of poetry and its value for centuries and figure in the current cultural theory of literature as well.

Aristotle built on Plato's idea of mimesis by stressing that imitation is basic to human nature, for humans understand things by comparing them and their representations, and this provides them pleasure too. His ideas on mimesis as a source of art figure mostly in the *Poetics*. The key element in this, which differentiates him from Plato, is that he does not consider imitation mere copying of the objects and things the poet sees around him. The poet actually reshapes them to increase the range of their possibilities from what they are or seem to be or ought to be. That is why he calls the poet a maker, who uses his skill to transform what he sees, and focuses on the poet's skill, *techne* as he calls it, as a means of artistic creation. Because of this, the act of imitation changes the character of the experience dealt with by the poet; it draws the admiration of the reader/spectator for its beauty as well as for the understanding that it promotes. And not just that: *techne*, in fact, improves upon nature through mimesis.

Seen specifically in the context of tragedy (Aristotle 10-19), which is at the heart of Aristotle's theory of art, the tragic poet, structures his experience in such a manner that it builds into it two kinds of rhythms, the affective and the cognitive, which culminate at the point of catharsis, where the tragic protagonist suffers a reversal in his situation. At that point, the emotions of the readers/spectators are purged, and they experience pleasure too. It is also a moment of what Aristotle calls *anagnorisis*, when the readers pass into a new awareness about the experience itself. Thus, art has affective value for the pleasure it provides and also cognitive value for the knowledge and awareness that it brings along with it. In this way, Aristotle disputes Plato's distrust of the work of poets. The arousal of emotions and their purgation, which has several layers of meaning, creates pleasure, which Aristotle clarifies in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Malcolm Heath xl). Thus, Aristotle confirms that Greek literature is both aesthetically pleasing and a source of knowledge as well.

The views of Plato and Aristotle were synthesized and elaborated by Horace in his *Ars Poetica*. He calls poets "skilled imitators," whose goal is to achieve excellence. Since he had the rich tradition of Greek poetry behind him, he urges poets either to imitate nature or the Greek masters, to achieve the desired end: "It is not enough that poems should have beauty; if they have to carry the audience with them, they should have charm as well" (Horace 101). For this, the poets need to have a firm grasp of emotions and a sound control

over the language for dramatizing them. But that is not all. They have also to make sure that their creations provide pleasure and help readers to learn from them: "The man who has managed to blend usefulness with pleasure wins everyone's approbation, for he delights his reader at the same time as he instructs him" (108). Horace, in this way, consolidates the classical mimetic aesthetics, and, along with several other poets of his time, becomes its illustrious practitioner.

While Aristotle and Horace associate beauty with the formal perfection of works of art, Longinus emphasizes that beauty in art is connected with sublimity, and elaborates that in *On the Sublime*. Going beyond prescriptive formulations regarding the creation of artworks, especially those of Horace, Longinus sees beauty in art in its power to transport, which he describes in a series of striking images. He states that for producing sublime, language has to be used in its most elevated form so that it does not merely persuade but also amaze and transport with wonder at all times and in every way. Sublime passages "exert an irresistible force and mastery" over the readers and the stroke of sublimity "scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker" (Longinus 114). He provides details about the sources of sublime to make the writers proficient in the production of sublime. In this way, Longinus draws attention to another finer aspect of the beauty of works of art, which influenced the concept of aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Yet another dimension to beauty is provided by Plotinus, who exerted considerable influence on medieval Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas. Since he reads Plato's *Symposium* in his own distinctive manner, he is called a Neo-Platonist, and his ideas are contained in his six *Enneads*. Plotinus's concept of beauty, which has implications for the making of artistic works, is found in his first treatise "On Beauty," and is connected with his writings on metaphysics, psychology, and ethics. Like Plato, he believes that the world around humans is just an appearance and the reality is somewhere beyond, which is connected with the One or the Good, intellect and soul. But he differs from Plato because he does not consider the appearances imperfect images of the ideal, but emanations from the unknowable, the One, towards which one can advance from the soul and intellect.

According to Plotinus, there are various types and degrees of beauty, the lowest being physical beauty, but all of them are images of the forms eternally present in the intellect and they are capable of moving towards higher forms, whose source is the Good, which is also the source of beauty, and also the cause of delight. Thus, Plotinus considers all forms of creations emanations from the realm of forms, which are in the intellect, and in turn, emanate from the One or Good that is available only through mystical insight. For the students

of arts and literature, Plotinus deals with the implications of his theory in Ennead V, 1:

> Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects … we must recognize that they [the arts] give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which nature derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus, Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight. (qtd. in James Seaton 24)

Although Plotinus uses the example of sculpture to affirm that an artwork as the product of mind is not inferior but superior to the objects it may represent, it could easily be applied to literary creations as well. That is why William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks consider Plotinus "the earliest systematic philosopher of the creative imagination" (118). Close to Plotinus' statement that artists create works that are "holders of beauty" and "add where nature is lacking" is Sir Philip Sidney's affirmation that poets improve upon nature, a view that goes back also to Aristotle. Sidney states this in forceful metaphors: "Only the poet … lifted up with the vigour of his own invention doth grow, in effect, into another nature…; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (Sidney 8).

Sidney's *Defence of Poetry,* which has rightly "determined his place in the history of aesthetics'' (Tatarkiewicz 297), synthesizes the ideas of almost all the Greek and Roman philosophers and critics, and is clearly reflected in his definition of poetry: "Poesy … is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end to teach and delight" (Sidney 9). In fact, it is because of the poet's ability to teach clearly and effectively that the poet, in his view, is superior to the historian and the philosopher. The poet is able to achieve this because teaching and learning go hand in hand with beauty that gives delight. Sidney considers the poet no less than a monarch, for "he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way as will entice any man to enter into it" (20). Because of this, poetry is beneficial and delightful. The vibrant literature of the Renaissance—the plays of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, John Webster, Ben Jonson, and the poetry of Edmund Spenser and Sidney are prime examples of this.

The idea of the poet's intimate connection with nature was emphasized by all the classical critics. Longinus, in particular, stressed that "she is not given to acting in random and wholly without system. Nature is the first cause and the fundamental creative principle in all activities" (115). Later critics expounded

this idea as natural sublime, an idea that eventually became the basis of the "interdependence of theology and aesthetics which profoundly affected the neoclassical doctrine of imitation in the arts" (Battestin 1) in the eighteenth century. Traces of this are there in Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, which affected the work of John Dennis, who considers Nature "nothing but that Rule and Order and Harmony, which we find in the visible Creation. The Universe owes its admirable Beauty to the Proportion, Situation, and Dependence of Parts…" (qtd. in Philip Shaw 30).

This idea finds its poetic expression in Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*:

> First follow Nature, and your judgement frame
> By her just standard, which is still the same.
> Unerring NATURE, still divinely bright,
> One clear, unchang'd, and universal light. (112-13)

The passage emphasizes that "Nature is a Platonic and universal order and superior reality," "assimilates readily with man's efforts to enforce or increase that order in his own affairs," and also "resides in a state of great harmony with the idea of the classical models" (Wimsatt and Brooks 237). This explains how the search for formal perfection, of observing the principles of harmony, balance, and regularity, which approximate the art of God, rules the artistic creations of the Augustan era. In his penetrating analysis of this unique phenomenon, Battestin has shown how scholars like Leo Spitzer, A. O. Lovejoy, and Earl Wasserman have established that the "universe of Windsor Forest and the *Essay on Man* [can be] conceived in terms of the Pythagorean principle of *concordia discors* and the Platonic metaphor of the Great Chain of Being. It is a universe of exquisite harmonies and of nice correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm" (4).

The correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm has another dimension as well. The possibility of perfection in the natural and artistic world is linked with the idea of perfection in human affairs, which provides another purposeful edge to artistic creations, in which writers, writing in different genres, hit at deviations from that possible perfection. This accounts for the pervasiveness of satire in them. This is quite an evidence in the whiplashes of John Dryden, the comic irony of Henry Fielding, the gentle, playful irony of Alexander Pope, and the militant irony of Jonathan Swift.

Right from the times of the Greeks to the eighteenth century, mimesis was the controlling principle for making literary creations, though with some variants, in which the writers' aesthetic concerns were wedded to societal concerns. Since it focused on the proficiency of writers to use their skill to

make or construct works of art, M. H. Abrams calls this "construction model," which changed with the coming of the romantics, who created a new model, which he calls "contemplation model" (138), in which the focus shifts to the mind of the perceived as the source of art. In an earlier volume by him, Abrams signifies this shift by designating it by the symbols of the mirror and the lamp. In his book *The Mirror and he Lamp* (1953), he argues that:

> During the eighteenth century the dominant model of literary creation was fundamentally transformed, from that of a mirror held up to nature to that of a lamp that emits light from a singular origin or source … the work of literature is no longer conceived as simply the representation of nature: instead, what is presented is as much a view of the poet's own interior, his or her mind or heart. (Bennett 49)

Literary historians have traced the beginnings of this change right from the eighteenth century, in the work of Joseph Addison and the Earl of Shaftesbury, and its exhaustive treatment in the work of Immanuel Kant (Abrams 159-90). In his trilogy of Critiques—of Pure Reason, Practical Reason, and Judgment—Kant deals with the philosophy of science, the philosophy of moral imperative, and the philosophy of general aesthetics. Though they are interrelated, the last one, in particular, had a profound influence on literary aesthetics, because a large part of it deals with the creation of artistic forms. Wood sums it up neatly when he states that the production of artistic forms is possible through a rearrangement of nature which:

> …requires genius, the gift through which, as Kant has it, 'nature gives the rule to art.' It is his or her inborn nature even more than it is mastery of certain knowable techniques that makes the artist. In really inspired art, the artist has no awareness of the wellsprings of his or her novel ideas. Here again, as in the case of natural beauty, it is as if nature, working through the artist as the source of inspiration, has the purpose of bringing about the peculiar aesthetic feelings. Indeed, for Kant it is inspired art that sensitizes us to the beauties of nature. It is as if through the artist nature is teaching us to appreciate its own beauties….Kant thus speaks of the whole aesthetic region as exhibiting 'purposiveness without a purpose'—that is, appearing as if it had a purpose without our being able definitely to assign a real purpose, as we can in ordinary human activity…. Pleasure itself—aesthetic or otherwise—Kant understands as the sign that a purpose has been fulfilled. (127-128)

In short, the artist is inspired to produce art that sees beauty in nature, which is

both a source of education and pleasure. In his discussions of beauty, sublimity, and artistic genius, Kant establishes connections between nature, the calling of the poet, and his or her moral obligation to establish that "beauty becomes a symbol of the morally good" (Wood 143). These concerns also engage the British romantic poets, as can be seen in William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, S. T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and Percy Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* which deal with the nature of poetry, the power of imagination as a creative force, and purpose of writing.

Wordsworth writes that the "Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner" (176). And he claims that "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science… the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time…. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man" (174-75).

Coleridge states that "the poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity," and that "GOOD sense is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its life, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole" (196-97). The main purpose of a poet's compositions, which are gracefully whole, is to give pleasure, and also to improve human knowledge and thought.

Shelley reconfirms the idea of poetry as a source of pleasure and wisdom: "Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight" (232). And then he makes bigger claims for poetry: "Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science…. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life" (250). The poets, in fact, are much more than writers of poems; they are also "the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion" (Shelley 228).

The remarkable thing about the poetry of the romantics is that their key

ideas on the creative process form the theme of many of their poems. Along with that, the poets also demonstrate their keen awareness of the social and political condition of their times. By writing about the ordinary rustics, Wordsworth released poetry from its aristocratic moorings and created a basis for the democratization of poetry. Critics have written extensively about the political and philosophical involvements of Coleridge and Shelley, as, for example, by William Kench and Peter Kitson. The poets, in short, have shown a strong awareness of the power of poetry, its concern with beauty, as well as their societal concerns.In a perceptive essay on Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, Timothy Clark observes that Shelley not only absorbs Plato's ideas on beauty but also sees the writer's creativity as "the manifestation of social, trans-individual energies. A writer is a volcano whose work gives vent to pent-up social aspirations or frustrations…. In fact, in one of his letters, he [Shelley] describes Wordsworth and Byron as deriving the energies of composition the new springs of thought and feeling which the great events of our age have exposed to view" (152).

The Victorians carried on with the same kind of thinking, as can be seen, for example, in the writings of Matthew Arnold, though he was not like the earlier romantics. Poetry, in his view, has the power of "forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can" (262). He is so confident about the power of poetry to move and to elevate that he considers poetry as a fit replacement for religion and philosophy. Not only that, but he also believes that "whatever was valuable in religion derived from its use of poetry. "The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry" (Seaton 35). He sets up high standards of value in criticism too, which he expounded in several of his essays.

The seriousness of poetry and its close relationship with the society of the day was temporarily eclipsed by the rise of voices in England, France, and America, that pleaded for the autonomy of art, of art's sole preoccupation with beauty. Edgar Allan Poe, in his *The Poetic Principle*, states that "beauty is the province of the poem," and beauty forms "the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem" (78-79). The contemplation of the beautiful provides "pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense" (79). In the very opening sentence of the Preface to *The Picture of the Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde states that "the artist is the creator of beautiful things" (xiii). This view also figures prominently in his essay "The Critic as Artist." Charles Baudelaire too gave prominence to the view that writers should only be devoted to the aesthetic in art.

All three writers were quick to realize that such a view was not viable enough to last long. Poe found it quite inhibiting. He equated beauty with the idea of "supernal loveliness," and moments of such loveliness could be

experienced only by writing about the death of beautiful women. Baudelaire realized that art only for itself "was doomed to sterility" because it left out moral considerations (qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks 480). Wilde clarified that stressing the desirability of beauty as the sole purpose of art was meant primarily to express dissatisfaction with the Philistine environment of his times (Wimsatt and Brooks 486). Except for this short-lived burst of pure aesthetics as the sole purpose of literary creations, literature continued, right from the 1890s to almost the end of World War II, reckoned by scholars as the time-span of modernism, with its engagement with aesthetic and social and moral concerns.

The most noticeable feature of modernism is what Andrjez Gasiorek calls the "aesthetics of exploration and disruption" (6) because writers of all hues and thinking—poets, novelists, and dramatists—responded to a series of changes that assumed the character of a crisis of sorts: loss of faith in religious systems, rapid changes in science and technology, the "commodification brought about by capitalism, the growth of mass culture and its influence, the invasion of bureaucracy into private life, and changing beliefs about between the sexes" (Butler 2).

The crisis generated diverse responses and led to a variety of experimental movements: German expressionism, French symbolism, Italian Futurism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Imagism, and many more. There were also competing activities, reflecting varied attitudes towards art, and also what Gasiorek calls "the aesthetics of anguish and despair." But all these, in their own varied ways, reflect the search by writers to find an appropriate medium for creating artistic works that were meant not only to be "intrinsically worthwhile but also indispensable to a civilised society… they wanted to urge the value of their work to the public sphere" (Gasiorek 18).

Ezra Pound put this in one of his letters: "My problem is to keep alive a certain group of advancing poets, to set the arts in their rightful place as the acknowledged guide and lamp of civilization" (qtd. in Gasiorek 18-19). It was meant to help the society to reflect on itself. All the innovations that are associated with the leading lights of modernism—Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and many others from different countries of the western world—are attempts to represent life by forms that are aesthetically appropriate, to satisfy their craving for perfection; they also embody their desire to reflect critically on the world around them and to create hope for human renewal.

Thus, it can be said that there is a clear connection between literature and the aesthetic that has lasted for centuries, and that writers' attempt to create works of art that aim at creating beauty is also intimately connected with the

quest for a better life for the humans. That makes literature a source of pleasure as well as a source of human improvement.

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