

CHAPTER - I I

IMAGERY : NATURE AND FUNCTION



CHAPTER - II

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The term "imagery" (i.e. images used collectively) is used to signify vivid and particularised descriptions in poetry. The terms 'image' and 'imagery' are ambiguous and abstract. They have many connotations and meanings. 'Image' originally meant a visual picture¹ but this meaning is imperfect and fails to explain the nature of image. The term invites various meanings and interpretations from writers and critics. Roger Fowler defines it as 'any sensuous effect provoked by literary language; and striking language; metaphor; symbol; any figure.'² To Caroline Spurgeon 'an image is the little word-picture used by a poet or prose writer to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his thought; it is a description or an idea, which by comparison or analogy stated or understood, with something else, transmits to us through its emotions and associations.'³ To A. D. Hope, 'Poetry consists in itself of a structure which is not a representation of anything in nature, though the elements of which this structure is composed may be representations, or as we more usually call them, images'.⁴ In the language of literary criticism the meaning of image has been extended in the sense that its use is no longer confined to the visual

but now includes the calling up in imagination of an impression made upon any of the five senses hearing, taste, touch, smell and sight. But it is restricted in the sense that it is now generally limited to such sensuous impressions when are used to make metaphors or similes.

Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra sensory experience. It has come to be used rather loosely to refer to images or pictures or figures of speech. The images are often visual, but many appeal, as stated above to any of our senses or may be conveyed through metaphor or simile or through direct description. Again, they may be conveyed in single words or in phrases or may form an extended metaphor which is used throughout a poem. So when we speak of imagery, we exclude direct description however visual and we include all metaphors and similes to whichever of the five senses they may be addressed.

Recent criticism has gone far beyond the older criticism in the emphasis of imagery in the sense as clue to poetic meaning, structure and effect. Its applications range all the way from "mental picture" to the total meaning presented by a poem. C.Day Lewis, for example, says that 'a poem is an image composed from a multiplicity of images'.⁵

Some critical extremists even maintain that implications of imagery constitute the basic plot or underlying "theme" of many narrative poems.

Metaphor and Simile

The type of the poetic image is the metaphor. The function of a metaphor is to turn one thing into another by transforming certain characteristics of the metaphorical object to the literal one, while yet never letting us forget that the literal object is itself. For example, 'A' is spoken of not as being like 'B', it has become 'B' as when Hope says:

Love, a romantic slime
That lubricates his way
Against the stream of Time,⁶

he is not telling us that Love is like a sticky mud that oils and slips the way. Love is the mud, and the mud is Love. Stickiness is common to both.

A simile grammatically sets two things side by side and tells us that they are alike. When Hope says :

----- The path slides like a snake,⁷

he is telling us that though 'path' and 'snake' are two different objects, certain elements of the second are seen as belonging to the first. A snake is known for its smoothness

and softness and the elements are to be seen in the 'path'. Here, the point to remember is that, whether the grammatical form is that of simile or metaphor, the purpose of the image is that, by a process of transference we should see one thing as having taken to itself something of another.

Kinds of Imagery

Regarding its kinds, imagery is used in many ways - some of it is conventional or traditional, as when a face of a maiden is compared to the moon. Hope, for example, compares the beauty of a woman to the freshening of a rose when he says :

And at his coming all their beauties stir,
Mysterious, like the freshening of a rose.⁸

Imagery can be experimental and scientific as when Hope compares the colour of woman's skin to the foggy colour of light and the shape of her mouth to circumflex in the following lines :

The thighs incurved, the skin misted with light,
The mouth repeating its own rich circumflex.⁹

In his Definition of Love Andrew Marvell uses an image drawn from geometry to describe love :

But Ours, though truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

In Brussels in Winter, W.H.Auden speaks of a phrase using an automobile image :

'A phrase goes packed with meaning like a van'.

Used in an appropriate context, such images bring in a great deal of freshness to poetry.

Then, there are the epic or extended similes which form images. They are drawn from the world of learning and scholarship rather than from observation. This form of imagery was used by Homer, and all later writers of epic took him as their model, it has become a standard feature of the epic style. In this form, each side and especially the "metaphorical" may extend to many lives; the latter may depict a fully developed scene, or even tell a short story. It was Milton who made powerful use of this form in his Paradise Lost :

Thus Satan talking to his nearest Mate
 With head up-lift above the wave, and Eyes.
 That sparkling blaz'd, his other Parts besides.
 Prone on the flood, extended long and large
 Lay floating many a road, in bulk as huge
 As----- that Sea-Beast
 Leviathan, which God of all his works
 Created hugest that swim the ocean stream.

Here, Satan who is lying spread out in Hell is compared to the leviathan at sea. Hope in his The End of a Journey attempts to use this form of imagery though not so impressively and successfully. He presents the picture of Ulysses in the following lines :

Setting his jaw, he turned and clambered down
 A goat-track to the beach; the tide was full
 He stood and brooded as the breaking wave
 Revolving many memories in his skull;
 Calypso singing in her haunted Cave,
 The bed of Circe, Hector in his grave
 And Priam butchered in his burning town¹⁰

Then, we have another kind of imagery namely sensuous imagery. It is related to one or the other of the five senses - sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. In the following lines from Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner :

Are those her sails that glance in the Sun
 Like restless gossamers, ?

We have a visual image, appealing to our sense of sight. In the same poem the poet uses auditory image, appealing to the sense of hearing and tactile which appeal to the sense of touch. He also uses muscular images in these lines :

With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,
 They dropped down one by one.

Olfactory images which appeal to the sense of smell can be illustrated by referring to the following lines from Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard :

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

As for gustatory images which appeal to our sense of taste, there is the famous stanza in Keats's The Eve of St. Agnes :

While he from forth the closet brought a heap
of candid apple, quince, and plum, and gourd,
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrups, tinct with Cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one.
From silken Samarkand to cedared Lebanon.

Other sensuous and physical experiences like cold, heat, moistness, tension, pressure and movements can also be suggested through images. The opening stanza in The Eve of St. Agnes : 'st. Agnes' Eve ! An ! Bitter chill it was !' expresses vividly the cold on a bitter wintry night, Coleridge's stanza in The Ancient Mariner : 'All in a hot and copper sky' pictures the intolerable heat on a summer noon at sea. The line in Keats's Ode to Autumn : 'Thou watchest the last oozing hours by hours' beautifully conveys the sense of moistness.

Then, there are Conceptual images such as those of the wanderer and exile and of journeys and voyages. Hope, for example, in The End of Journey describes the wandering of Ulysses :

But with the dawn he rose and stepped outside
A farm-cart by the doorway dripped and stank,
Piled with the victims of his mighty bow.¹¹

Poets also use Spatial images like those of the city, island, garden, river, forest and mountain for the allegorical or symbolic significance. Hope, for example, uses these images in a number of poems. His most famous and wellknown poem The Wandering Islands begins with the image of island which never come together :

You can not build bridges between the wandering
islands.
The Mind has no neighbours, and the unteachable
heart
Announces its armistice time after time but spends
Its love to draw them closer and closer apart¹²

Here, the wandering islands are the symbols of human beings that are lonely, helpless and aparted from one another.

There can be a logical coherence in imagery. In these circumstances, an image develops a representative quality - it represents a species. In Hope's Conquistador the decline of Henry Clay is summed up by singling out a few representative images which stands for the five elements - the world of nature, of animal, of man and his adventure and love.

A distinction is sometimes made between the image of thought and the image of impression. The first one is said to be Modernist and the second one Romantic. The image of thought emphasises the relationship between the terms which

are fully stated and which contain the meaning of the image. T.S.Eliot, for example, compares the lingering sunset to a patient etherised upon a table. The image of impression on the other hand, works by suggestion through a word-picture which has an emotional value of its own. Wordsworth, for example, compares the leech gatherer to a stone. This is a helpful distinction though it may not be applicable in all cases.

Following another and a more important distinction, we may say that imagery serves a four-fold function. It can have a sensuous, an imaginative, an archetypal and a spiritual appeal. It is at the archetypal level that imagery ascends to the level of symbolism. In this respect, personification may almost hit symbolic levels as in Hope's The Martyrdom of st. Teresa :

Death with a smile expertly slices
A rib for one, for one the Knee¹³

But it is usually a cold figure of speech, close to allegory. This can yield us only abstract images. But symbols are different. They are centres of infinite poetic suggestion. A permanent flash of Reason is infused into a natural object by the poet and it becomes a symbol. As an example, we may consider Shelley's Ode to the West Wind. The West Wind is the natural object here. When Shelley experienced the thrill of the west wind he was sitting in the

forest in coastal Italy. His intuition was aroused and the West Wind became for him a symbol of the wind God, Marut, Destroyer and Preserver. In a sense, greater than such symbols are the symbolic personifications created by the world's great - poets, dramatists and novelists - Adam and Eve, Satan, Hamlet and even Ram and Sita.

Poets sometimes use an old myth in order to create a new symbol - as Keats does in his Ode to Psyche. A whole myth can be turned into metaphor as C Day. Lewis does in his poem about Perseus, Medusa and the magic glass. Like Perseus, the poet is able to put an end to the Medusa - like chaos and meaninglessness of this world only when he catches the image of the world in the magic glass of Art. Poets can also invent a myth of their own as Shakespeare does about the "daffodils that come before the swallow dares" in The Winter's Tale.

Why Imagery ?

The purpose of an image is to speak directly to the imagination through one or more of the five senses. Sound has a significant place in poetry but the total effect of poetry comes of the perfect union of sound and sense. What the words say to us must speak as directly to our imagination as do their sounds. Most of the poets through imagery make something happen to us rather than telling us

something. Imagery helps to evoke in the readers' mind the experience the writer wishes to communicate. Milton said that poetry must be "Sensuous, Simple and Passionate". Shakespeare, in his own person through the character of Theseus in A Midsummer Night's Dream says :

..... As imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to Shapes, and gives to airy nothings
 A local habitation and a name

What the poet has to say to us must come to us in a body, or concrete form, a shape visible to the eye, "airy nothings", forms of things unknown", are until they are "bodies forth", no stuff for poetry. What imagery does in poetry is to body forth the inner meaning of the poem, quite apart from its sense or outer meaning. It is the delicate faerie-like subtle body which holds this inner meaning. The inner meaning is the substance of the attitudes and moods kindled in the personality of the poet by the vision of Reality. In this respect, Caroline Spurgeon's study of Shakespeare's imagery is a case in point. She has discovered that imagery reveals the personality of the writer with his attitudes, tastes and experiences, and quality of mind.¹⁴ This makes it clear that poetry is addressed to the imagination; abstract concepts address themselves solely to the intellect. Therefore poetry must be sensuous. The value of poetry is so generally admitted may account for this

point. An attempt must be made for the use of sensuous imagery in poetry which is a necessity imposed by the limitations of language.

The Function of Imagery

The first and the simplest function of imagery is to embody the abstract in sensuous form. Shirley says :

"Death lays his icy hands on Kings"

What the poet is telling us is that 'even kings do not escape death'. But if put like this its impact is nil. Seeing death in a living body form and laying its hand, we not only 'see' but 'feel' the experience. The image thus remains stamped upon our memory because the image of death which is abstract is presented in a sensuous, appealing form. Secondly, this sensuousness intensifies the impact of the poem on readers.

The second function of imagery is that it must be Selective. There is an economy of words. Few words convey so much of meaning which otherwise is not possible. This selectiveness is a quality of all imagery. It gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion in a way no precise description, however clear and accurate, can possibly do. The quality precision is one of the vital contributions which imagery makes to poetry. Without imagery poetry would be

abstract and it would lack these qualities which raise it above clear, logical explanation. It is imagery which vitalises such expression, infusing it with enough suggestions of weights and textures, shapes and colours. Imagery gives to cold, logical thought the power to excite emotion.

To conclude, imagery is all important in poetry. The true poet has at his disposal imagery belonging to many diverse fields of experience, and the greater the poet is, possibly the more fields in the affairs of life will be at his disposal from which to draw his imagery. It is through imagery that we discover the inner meaning of a poem. We are then in direct contact with the poet's moods and attitudes. To convey this experience is after all, the chief intention of poetry and through imagery the poet fulfills this intention.

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