

The Influence Of Renaissance On English Literature

Introduction:

It is difficult to date or define the Renaissance. Etymologically the term, which was first used in England only as late as the nineteenth century, means' "re-birth". Broadly speaking, the Renaissance implies that re-awakening of learning which came to Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The Renaissance was not only an English but a European phenomenon; and basically considered, it signalled a thorough substitution of the medieval habits of thought by new attitudes. The dawn of the Renaissance came first to Italy and a little later to France. To England it came much later, roughly about the beginning of the sixteenth century. As we have said at the outset, it is difficult to date the Renaissance; however, it may be mentioned that in Italy the impact of Greek learning was first felt when after the Turkish conquest of Constantinople the Greek scholars fled and took refuge in Italy carrying with them a vast treasure of ancient Greek literature in manuscript. The study of this literature fired the soul and imagination of the Italy of that time and created a new kind of intellectual and aesthetic culture quite different from that of the Middle Ages. The light of the Renaissance came very slowly to the isolated island of England, so that when it did come in all its brilliance in the sixteenth century, the Renaissance in Italy had already become a spent force.

It is difficult to define the Renaissance, but its broad implications in England do not defy discussion. Michelet exaggeratedly calls the Renaissance "discovery by mankind of himself and of the world." This is, indeed, too sweeping. More correctly we can say that the following are the implications of the Renaissance in England :

(a) First, the Renaissance meant the death of mediaeval scholasticism which had for long been keeping human thought in bondage. The schoolmen got themselves entangled in useless controversies and tried to apply the principles of Aristotelean . philosophy to the doctrines of Christianity, thus giving birth to a vast literature characterised by polemics, casuistry, and sophistry which did not advance man in any way.

(b) Secondly, it signalled a revolt against spiritual authority-the authority of the Pope. The Reformation, though not part of the revival of learning, was yet a companion movement in England. This defiance of spiritual authority went hand in hand with that of intellectual authority. Renaissance intellectuals distinguished themselves by their flagrant anti-authoritarianism.

(c) Thirdly, the Renaissance implied a greater perception of beauty and polish in the Greek and Latin scholars. This beauty and this polish were sought by Renaissance men of letters to be incorporated in their native literature. Further, it meant the birth of a kind of imitative tendency implied in the term "classicism."

(d) Lastly, the Renaissance marked a change from the theocentric to the homocentric conception of the universe. Human life, pursuits, and even body came to be glorified. "Human life", as G. H. Mair observes, "which the mediaeval Church had taught them [the people] to regard but as a threshold and stepping-stone to eternity, acquired suddenly a new momentousness and value.".The "otherworldliness" gave place to "this-worldliness". Human values came to be recognised as permanent values, and they

were sought to be enriched and illumined by the heritage of antiquity. This bred a new kind of paganism and marked the rise of humanism as also, by implication, materialism. Let us now consider the impact of the Renaissance on the various departments of English literature.

Non-creative Literature:

Naturally enough, the first impact of the Renaissance in England was registered by the universities, being the repositories of all learning. Some English scholars, becoming aware of the revival of learning in Italy, went to that country to benefit by it and to examine personally the manuscripts brought there by the fleeing Greek scholars of Constantinople. Prominent among these scholars were William Grocyn (14467-1519), Thomas Linacre (1460-1524), and John Colet (14677-1519). After returning from Italy they organised the teaching of Greek in Oxford. They were such learned and reputed scholars of Greek that Erasmus came all the way from Holland to learn Greek from them. Apart from scholars, the impact of the Renaissance is also; in a measure, to be seen on the work of the educationists of the age. Sir Thomas Elyot (14907-1546) wrote the Governour (1531) which is a treatise on moral philosophy modelled on Italian works and full of the spirit of Roman antiquity. Other educationists were Sir John Cheke (1514-57), Sir Thomas Wilson (1525-81), and Sir Roger Ascham (1515-68). Out of all the educationists the last named is the most important, on account of his Scholemaster published two years after his death. Therein he puts forward his views on the teaching of the classics. His own style is too obviously based upon the ancient Roman writers. "By turns", remarks Legouis, "he imitates Cicero's periods and Seneca's nervous conciseness". In addition to these well-known educationists must be mentioned the sizable number of now obscure ones—"those many unacknowledged, unknown guides who, in school and University, were teaching men to admire and imitate the masterpieces of antiquity" (Legouis).

Prose:

The most important prose writers who exhibit well the influence of the Renaissance on English prose are Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, Lyly, and Sidney. The first named was a Dutchman who, as we have already said, came to Oxford to learn Greek. His chief work was The Praise of Folly which is the English translation of his most important work-written in England. It is, according to Tucker Brook, "the best expression in literature of the attack that the Oxford reformers were making upon the medieval system." Erasmus wrote this work in 1510 at the house of his friend Sir Thomas More who was executed at the bidding of Henry VIII for his refusal to give up his allegiance to the ' Pope. More's famous prose romance Utopia was, in the words of Legouis, "true prologue to the Renaissance." It was the first book written by an Englishman which achieved European fame; but it was written in Latin (1516) and only later (1555) was translated into English. Curiously enough, the next work by an English man again to acquire European fame-Bacon's Novum Organwn-was also written originally in Latin. The word "Utopia" is from Greek "ou topos" meaning "no place". More's Utopia is an imaginary island which is the habitat of an ideal republic. By the picture of the ideal state is implied a kind of social criticism of contemporary England. More's indebtedness to Plato's Republic is quite obvious. However, More seems also to be indebted to the then recent discoveries of the explorers and navigators-like Columbus and Vasco da Gama who were mostly of Spanish and Portuguese nationalities. In Utopia, More discredits mediaevalism in all its

implications and exalts the ancient Greek culture. Legouis observes about this work : "The Utopians are in revolt against the spirit of chivalry : they hate warfare and despise soldiers. Communism is the law of the land; all are workers for only a limited number of hours. Life should be pleasant for all; asceticism is condemned. More relies on the goodness of human nature, and intones a hymn to the glory of the senses which reveal nature's wonders. In Utopia all religions are authorized, and tolerance is the law. Scholasticism is scoffed at, and Greek philosophy preferred to that of Rome. From one end to the other of the book More reverses medieval beliefs." More's Utopia created a new genre in which can be classed such works as Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1626), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885), W. H. Hudson's *The Crystal Age* (1887), William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, and H. G. Well's *A Modern Utopia* (1905).

Passing on to the prose writers of the Elizabethan age—the age of the flowering of the Renaissance—we find them markedly influenced both in their style and thought-content by the revival of the antique classical learning. Sidney in *Arcadia*, Lyly in *Euphues*, and Hooker in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* write an English which is away from the language of common speech, and is either too heavily laden—as in the case of Sidney and Lyly—with bits of classical finery, or modelled on Latin syntax, as in the case of Hooker. Cicero seemed to these writers a very obvious and respectable model. Bacon, however, in his sententiousness and cogency comes near Tacitus and turns away from the prolixity, diffuseness, and ornamentation associated with Ciceronian prose. Further, in his own career and his *Essays*, Bacon stands as a representative of the materialistic, Machiavellian facet of the Renaissance, particularly of Renaissance Italy. He combines in himself the dispassionate pursuit of truth and the keen desire for material advance.

Poetry:

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and the Earl of Surrey (15177-47) were pioneers of the new poetry in England. After Chaucer the spirit of English poetry had slumbered for upward of a century. The change in pronunciation in the fifteenth century had created a lot of confusion in prosody which in the practice of such important poets as Lydgate and Skelton had been reduced to a mockery. "The revival", as Legouis says, "was an uphill task; verse had to be drawn from the languor to which it had sunk in Stephen Hawes, and from the disorder in which a Skelton had plunged it; all had to be done anew". It was Wyatt and Surrey who came forward to do it.

As Mair puts it, it is with "these two courtiers that the modern English poetry begins." Though they wrote much earlier, it was only in 1557, a year before Elizabeth's coronation, that their work was published in Tottel's *Miscellany* which is, according to G. H. Mair, "one of the landmarks of English literature." Of the two, Wyatt had travelled extensively in Italy and France and had come under the spell of Italian Renaissance. It must be remembered that the work of Wyatt and Surrey does not reflect the impact of the Rome of antiquity alone, but also that of modern Italy. So far as versification is concerned, Wyatt and Surrey imported into England various new Italian metrical patterns. Moreover, they gave English poetry a new sense of grace, dignity, delicacy, and harmony which was found by them lacking in the works of Chaucer and the Chaucerians alike. Further, they were highly influenced by the love poetry of Petrarch and they did their best to imitate it. Petrarch's love poetry is of the courtly kind, in which the pining lover is shown as a "servant" of his mistress with his heart tempest-tossed by

her neglect and his mood varying according to her absence or presence. There is much of idealism, if not downright artificiality, in this kind of love poetry.

It goes to the credit of Wyatt to have introduced the sonnet into English literature, and of Surrey to have first written blank verse. Both the sonnet and blank verse were later to be practised by a vast number of the best English poets. According to David Daiches. "Wyatt's sonnets represent one of the most interesting movements toward metrical discipline to be found in English literary history." Though in his sonnets he did not employ regular iambic pentameters yet he created a sense of discipline among the poets of his times who had forgotten the lesson and example of Chaucer and, like Skelton, were writing "ragged" and "jagged" lines which jarred so unpleasantly upon the ear. As Tillyard puts it, Wyatt "let the Renaissance into English verse" by importing Italian and French patterns of sentiment as well as versification. He wrote in all thirty-two sonnets out of which seventeen are adaptations of Petrarch. Most of them (twenty-eight) have the rhyme-scheme of Petrarch's sonnets; that is, each has the octave a bbaabba and twenty-six out of these twenty-eight have the c d d c e e sestet. Only in the last three he comes near what is called the Shakespearean formula, that is, three quatrains and a couplet. In the thirtieth sonnet he exactly produced it; this sonnet rhymes a b a b, a b a b, a b a b, c c. Surrey wrote about fifteen or sixteen sonnets out of which ten use the Shakespearean formula which was. to enjoy the greatest popularity among the sonneteers of the sixteenth century. Surrey's work is characterised by .exquisite grace and tenderness which we find missing from that of Wyatt. Moreover, he is a better craftsman and gives greater harmony to his poetry. Surrey employed blank verse in his translation of the fourth book of The Aeneid, the work which was first translated into English verse by Gavin Douglas a generation earlier, but in heroic couplets.

Drama:

The revival of ancient classical learning scored its first clear impact on English drama in the middle of the sixteenth century. Previous to this impact there had been a pretty vigorous native tradition of drama, particularly comedy. This tradition had its origin in the liturgical drama and had progressed through the miracle and the mystery, and later the morality, to the interlude. John Heywood had written quite a few vigorous interludes, but they were altogether different in tone, spirit, and purpose from the Greek and Roman drama of antiquity. The first English regular tragedy Gorboduc (written by Sackville and Norton, and first acted in 1562) and comedy Ralph Roister Doister (written about 1550 by Nicholas Udall) were very much imitations of classical tragedy and comedy. It is interesting to note that English dramatists came not under the spell of the ancient Greek dramatists "(Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the tragedy writers, and Aristophanes, the comedy writer) but the Roman dramatists (Seneca, the tragedy writer, and Plautus and Terence! the comedy writers). It was indeed unfortunate, as Greek drama is vastly superior to Roman drama. Gorboduc is a slavish imitation of Senecan tragedy and has all its features without much of its life. Like Senecan tragedy it has revenge as the tragic —otive, has most of its important incidents (mostly murders) narrated on the -stage by messengers, has much of rhetoric and verbose declamation, has a ghost among its dramatis personae, and so forth. '.'. is indeed a good instance of the "blood and thunder" kind' of tragedy. Ralph Roister Doister is modelled upon Plautus and Terence. It is based on the stupid endeavours of the hero for winning the love of a

married woman. There is the cunning, merry slave-Matthew Merrygreek-a descendant of the Plautine slave who serves as the motive power which keeps the play going. Later on, the "University Wits" struck a note of independence in their dramatic work. They refused to copy Roman drama as slavishly as the writers of Gorboduc and Roister Doister. Even so, their plays are not free from the impact of the Renaissance; rather they show it as amply, though not in the same way. In their imagination they were all fired by the new literature which showed them new dimensions of human capability. They were humanists through and through. All of them—Lyly, Greene, Peele, Nashe, Lodge, Marlowe, and Kyd-show in their dramatic work not, of course, a slavish tendency to ape the ancients but a chemical action of Renaissance learning on the native genius fired by the enthusiasm of discovery and aspiration so typical of the Elizabethan age. In this respect Marlowe stands in the fore-front of the University Wits. Rightly has he been called "the true child of the Renaissance".