

Ben Jonson's Criticism

Introduction

Ben Jonson is a poet and dramatist than a critic. There is plenty of criticism in his poems, plays, prefaces and in his dedications. "Timber" or "Discoveries" is one of his famous critical works. In all his criticism, he wanted writers to write well not by chance but knowingly. All Ben Jonson's plays are modeled on the Latin drama. In his criticism, he follows Aristotle and Horace. "Discoveries" is a collection of notes that he made from time to time.

His Classicism

Jonson did not like the classic for their own sake but he wanted to raise the English standards on par with the Greek and Latin. English literature, according to Ben Jonson, had passion, imagination and expression in excess. Even Shakespeare had everything in excess. Jonson found well-trying law in "Poetics". In his notes, he talks about the need of unity of action and unity of time. A story is an imitation of one action. A plot must have a beginning, middle and an end. Action in a comedy or tragedy should be fit; it should give rise to the conclusion of the play. Jonson says that a play can exceed the 24 hours' time because life has so many digressions, so art can also have digressions. Every part of a play should be one and whole.

The Qualifications of a Poet

Jonson, like Sidney, calls a poet a 'maker' or 'feigner'. Like Sidney, he calls poetry as the queen of arts. There are five requirements for a good poet: what he should be by nature, by exercise, by imitation, by study and by art. Poetry is largely an outcome of training and practice. A poet or the maker should have good natural wit. To perfect a poem, a poet should imitate nature. He can also imitate what others have said. Jonson also asks the poets to study. He believes in Bacon's statement – 'reading maketh a full man'. He follows Aristotle and Horace and says that art can lead a poet to perfection.

His Observation on Style

Ben Jonson is against the Elizabethan use of extravagant expression. He has no use for words for their own sake. Words mean thoughts. Words are like the relation between body and soul. Words are lifeless without soul. It should be used aptly. To use words one should require three necessities – to read the best authors, observe the best speakers and exercise of his own.

He repeats his remarks on imitation, when he talks about reading the best author. He thinks that our mind and memory are sharpened when we read other writers. The same will happen when a writer listens to a good speech. A writer should not be content with the first word and with the first arrangement of words. He should revise them repeatedly and arrive at the best. A writer should write for the learned people. He can use ancient words, which are majestic.

Estimates on Bacon and Shakespeare

In his critical works, Ben Jonson talks about Montaigne, Spenser, Marlowe, Sidney, Donne, Bacon and Shakespeare. Bacon passes the test fully. According to Jonson, Bacon spoke neatly, more weightily and suffered less emptiness and idleness. His own writings resembled Bacon's. Bacon, according to Jonson, would say twenty things in ten words. Shakespeare is an honest and open natured poet. He has brave notions and gentle expressions. He has powerful wit. He frames his own rules with his wit and he succeeds. He has more virtues than vices. He is someone to be praised than to be pardoned.

His Liberal Concept of Rules

Jonson also talks about the rules given by the ancients. He wants a writer to read and learn as much as possible. He never advises them to rest in the soul authority of what they read. If a writer finds some truth and fitness that the ancients haven't found he can say it in his own way. A writer can consider the classics as their guides and not as commanders.

Conclusion/ the Value of His Criticism

Jonson saw some danger in the English literature. Shakespeare and Bacon had their own lights to guide them but no other writers. Jonson in his criticism, address to the other English writers. He is not against new paths, provided they conform to nature and reason. He also advises critics. He asks critics to look at the intricacies of poetic art. To judge a poet one must be a best poet. To sum up Ben Jonson's criticism we can use the word 'the curb' – the necessity of submission to a code of conduct both on the part of the writer and the critic.

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