THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH POETRY

Meaningful experiences of development of the English poetry start with the Epic poem Beowulf, written in Land which cannot be understood today. Indeed, Seamus Heaney has translated Beowulf in Modern English.

The poem showed the alliterative use of the line tighter with rhyme couplets. Being an epic poem was also a narrative poem: it told the story of the hero Beowulf. His world underlining that it was an oral form of poetry and therefore it had to rely lots of sound devices to be remembered and handed down to posterity. It follows that the first forms of poetry re narrative as you can also see in Medieval ballads that are generally about tragic love stories, the supernatural and the fights of the borders between Scotland and England. Such ballads were organised into quatrains and used a very simple language, suitable to be understood even by the illiterate. Even in the case of ballads, sound effects were of utmost importance because ballads a form of poetry composted to be danced during public festivals. The characters are just sketched and the telling mixes narration and dialogue. Tone is generally nostalgic. Setting is therefore really relevant because it contributes to atmosphere and mood.

The ballads were ideally addressed to the common people, in the Middle ages literary form suitable to the literate is represented by poetic forms like the Prologues of the Canterbury tales. The religious elements play a significant role considered that the privileged code of the period is the religious one. It’s a consequence, traditional values are the ones widespread by the Church.

During the Renaissance the feature of the religious code are still present, but the intelligent reader meets also courtesans and lyrical beauty as you can see from the success of sonnet collections that are inhabited by women whose purpose and obligation are to morally raise man. Gradually, the sonnet moves on from the courteous code even if it keeps its structure that in England is mainly the sue of the Elizabethan sonnet and namely one consisting of three quatrains and a rhyming couplet. Being sonnets a lyrical form of poetry, they focus on ultimate and personal elements and ultimately, they tell about reserved and personal experiences. It will be W. Shakespeare through a personal use of parody to change the content of the sonnet form. Suffice it to think of sonnet where “My mistress’ eyes” do no longer remind to the blue eyes of Dante’s Beatrice but they rather “are nothing like the sun”. It’s a consequence the courteous code that dominated al the lyrical experience of and on the Continent shows its first signs of transformations. This happens because human aspects and human rituals came to the fore front. Man /The human beings replace God, without neglection the religious element. Considering all Shakespearean drama as well as the Elizabethan one: it is written in verse, where the privileged line is the iambic pentameter. It follows that the poetical reframes of the dramatic experience have to meet the tastes of whatever spectator. Questions and issues, typically human, represent the pivot of the play.

Great Shakespeare tragedies bring on the stage human beings’ faults: the thirst of power (Macbeth), the difficulty to make decisions and act accordingly (Hamlet), jealousy (Othello), lust (Anthony and Cleopatra). However the human being refers still to religious values respecting the philosophy of the Chain of Beings, where anybody has been grew a precise place. This is the reason why John Milton’s Satan is a devilish demon and yet really attractive. “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” is Satan’s motto, really appreciated by readers because they identify themselves with that peculiar human feature. John Milton is the second best in importance after Shakespeare and gives voice to the Puritan element; in his epic poetry. Readers appreciate Satan because they recognise themselves in his weakness.

An additional meaningful experience in the development of English poetry is given by Metaphysical poetry that, as T. S. Eliot will say, can fuse mind and emotion, and the mixture will be totally lost after Metaphysical poetry, of which John Donne is the most outstanding figure.

The novel of Metaphysical poetry consists in the poet’s skills to integrate experiences that belong to different fields of human experience and include also areas considered far from the typical content of typical poetry. Earth quakes, geometrical aspects and others enter the poetical text becoming for the readers of The Enlightenment particularly “strange” and bitterly criticised.

During the 18th century, poetry becomes mainly mock-heroic poetry: lines written to create a parody of aristocracy, a social class that in the period was gradually losing its mainstream position in favour of an emergent middle class. Alexander Pope writes an heroic poem called “The Rape of the Lock”: a poem to speak about a man from aristocracy that has cut a lock of a girl. He is lazy to understand how the dignity of epic poem results de-classed to speak about a trivial topic. Of course, poetry is not the typical literary genre of the 18th century, being The Enlightenment the century that records the birth of the novel.