

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE POETRY OF ARCHITECTURE

Humpty Dumpty's king and wall

In Garbett's chain of beauty, poetry occupies the apex. It is the highest rung to which the art of architecture can aspire, it is that which teaches, which elevates the mind and makes a permanent impression on the beholder. When architecture becomes poetic, it becomes semantically complete; poetic architecture is architecture in the fullest sense of the word. It serves not just the owner, the user, the beholder but the nation as a whole, the nation as a movement towards a greater purpose. What does poetry mean? What is it? and How does it apply to architecture?

Three sorts of poetry without language

Where there is no language, writes Garbett, there can be no poetry in the strict sense; yet we hear of the poetry of music and of architecture; hence this term must be taken in a more extended sense. It may be understood in three ways: first, as applying to the untaught portion, or that portion which transcends the rules and theory of the art in their present state;

That is where it becomes the product of genius,

...secondly, as including those beauties or perfections in each art, which are not, or have not been, conveyed in any other - consequently not in words;

That is where architecture is asked to remain true to itself, i.e. where it is pure and truthful

...thirdly, as applying to those qualities by which its highest productions are calculated to produce, not only a transient emotion, but a permanent effect on the beholder. ¹

This last refers to the didactic appeal of poetry, its function to create an identity for a nation or epoch and thus to bundle the energies of that subject to some greater cause. So the poetry of architecture is pure, evades or outstrips formulation, and

1. *Treatise*, p. 31.

elevates. It is a medium between the low and the high and a category which, by soaring higher, evades categorisation.

Architecture, not being a phonetic art, cannot utter meaning in the same way that words can, it is confined to exploiting emotive possibilities. The poetry of architecture lies not in the narrative handling of a building, but in the satisfaction of rhetorical aims that are similar to those of written poetry: that is, to exalt spiritually and thereby to teach. In that sense architecture and music are subject to a *langue*. Poetry is a grammar of approach to experience. It reformulates experience to exploit emotions for a moral purpose.

is and ought I

The poetry of architecture as Garbett understood it, like heroic poetry, points to an *ought*, and redefines reality and truth in terms of that ought. Ruskin's definition of poetry in the third volume of *Modern Painters* provides a very Aristotelian

definition of poetry which says that *poetry is the suggestion by the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions.*² That sets the program for the redefinition just mentioned.

The rational of nature

In order to exalt and teach, the object has to be made to conform to a particular explanation of experience. That engages words like truth and purity. We know that Garbett's poetry of architecture relies on the ideas of purity, unity, and truth. These concepts were, as we have seen, elaborated into the principles of constructive truth and constructive unity as the causal ideas of *true style* in architecture. That is one aspect which is related and anticipates Garbett's concept of poetry. Ruskin, in his *Poetry of Architecture* insists on a *unity of feeling*.³ Both Ruskin's unity of feeling and Garbett's constructive unity probably rely on Alison's

2. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, p. 288.

3. Ruskin, *Works*, I, p. 8-9.

insistence on a *unity of character of expression*.⁴ As far as Garbett is concerned, the idea of unity also relies on William Whewell's demand that any new system of architecture would demand a *principle of unity*. For Garbett a building cannot be poetic if its essential qualities can be conveyed equally well by another art, such as writing, hieroglyphics or heraldry, painting, sculpture and so forth. In other words Garbett's sense of architectural purity makes every effort to distinguish itself from Ruskin's supposed decorative, painterly and sculptural approach. For Garbett purity means that architecture must not be made reliant on its sister arts. Architecture degrades itself by trying to become something it is not: a tailor's dummy for the pinning on of a *parole*, or by being subservient to another art. And yet he uses the ambitions of poetry to formulate those of architecture. He can do this because poetry stands for an approach to

4. Alison (1825) p. 133; Beardsley (1973) p. 205.

experience, namely: the synthetic understanding of nature projected onto a moral purpose. Written poetry and architecture both conform, each in their own way, to the laws of nature and their aims overlap where nature is seen as purposive.

purity as the loyalty to an explanation

Architecture must rely exclusively on the rational of Nature to become pure. That rational when devoted to a greater cause, becomes poetic. Poetry, or rather the systematic analysis of nature that is called poetic, exploits the significance of correspondences between phenomena extrapolated from an experience of nature: the metaphor, the simile, etc. and projects them to a moral purpose. On that basis sympathies are generated between, for example, the landscape and the building, the idea of nation, national character and style etc. All these factors become political. The poetry of architecture does not analyse the prejudices upon which these correspondences rest, it accepts, confirms

and relies on them and takes them further, poetry glorifies and exalts prejudice. After all it teaches, and teaching implies knowledge of nature and knowledge of nature is necessarily based on prejudice, or to put the same meaning in a kinder light: on interpretation. Truth is merely a form of loyalty to that interpretation.

Is and Ought II

Having defined what is pure, Poetry has to divide the world into an *is* and an *ought*. Having done that it immediately rejects the former. The latter, according to Aristotle's rules of poetry, binds good looks to good character.⁵ Louis Étienne Boullée expresses a very similar idea at around the same time as Alison. Boullée writes that,

Our buildings -and our Public Buildings in particular- should be to some extent like poems. The Impression they make on us should arouse in us sensations that

5. Aristotle (1975) p. 51-52.

*correspond to the function of the building in question.*⁶

But this has to be read with all missing words and that Boullée takes for granted put back in place. With function he means to celebrate that function in a utopian, or ideal setting. Boullée refers to function in a world he wants to create, a world as the world ought to be.

The correspondence in sensation and function that Boullée demands extends the idea of an *architecture parlante* to include Aristotle's rules of rhetorical correspondence, which in turn anticipate far more closely the ideas on expression as developed by Alison. Boullée sets up a system of rhetorical sympathies between particular ideals and their appropriate expression which is strongly reminiscent of Garbett's theory of expression: a particular function requires a particular expression that enhances the object and what it stands for as it ought to be.

6. Rosenau (1976) p. 82.

Poetry and nation

The most interesting of these persistent sympathies is the correspondence which architecture seeks with the idea of nationhood. Ruskin's *Poetry of Architecture* was particularly concerned with that correspondence.⁷ Ruskin on the basis of Burke's very influential formulation of the idea of nationhood, promoted the idea that architecture has the ability to be poetic in the sense that it projects an ought for the nation to enhance itself with. The connection between nation and architecture manifests itself very clearly in the correspondence felt between material decay and moral decay of a nation. This correspondence had been described by Gibbon although the metaphorical role of architecture with regard to nation and moral strength had already been exploited in texts as old as the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Bible. The metaphorical connection between nation, age and architecture

7. Ruskin, *Works*, I, p. 5.

becomes a specific concern in the nineteenth century. And it is a connection which is peculiarly appropriate to the idea of a poetical architecture. Plato had banished the poets from his *Republic* because they told lies; Aristotle had responded to this radical eviction by reserving a special place for the kind of poetry which subordinated daily truth to greater truths, putting these greater truths, which were nothing if not small but useful lies, in the service of the moral improvement of the nation or city-state. The presumed aesthetic health of a buildings had already been related to the presumed health of a society by Alberti. This connection was rediscovered in the eighteenth century. It derives, or finds its equivalent in the *Raphael versus Rembrandt* aesthetics of Reynolds. Poetic truth is not a Rembrandtesque truth of tangible reality, it is a greater truth floating in the world of absolutes and represented in the visions of the androgenising Raphael. That is poetry's normative function.

Poetry, as system for emotional mobilisation, has particular metaphysical feature which involves both division and re-unification. Poetry seeks out universal correspondences and sympathies in form, meaning and purpose. It dislocates the world as it is understood, to generate new and supplementary forms and meanings which specifically serve the purpose of creating purpose, a moral purpose. The idea of nation does something similar. The idea of nation achieves a particular force when it is invoked by those sections of society which feel themselves and their life to be under threat. Poetry similarly serves a special purpose under these conditions. And remember that Garbett had identified a crisis of. The architectural crisis he focused on was only a diagram of a much greater crisis, a national crisis. For this reason a poetry of architecture was invoked.

The morality of synthesis

Poetry on this level is the celebration of re-union. The destruction of society presupposes a separation, a division. The

poetic architect, armed with the principles of constructive truth and unity, having diagnosed the separation between content from form, glorifies their subsequent welding. Thus meaning and form, content and shape are resolved into a state of interdependency and are allowed to enhance each other. Poetry in architecture refers to symphonic qualities, whereby separate and distinct entities developed by a new understanding of experience, work together purposively and in union within a normative setting. Poetry, music, architecture etc. work upon the basis that they separate experience into distinct and newly perceived truths and fuse these truths into a comprehensible and newly identified whole:

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical

*power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of imagination. This power (...) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonises the natural and artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.*⁸

In other words poetry is a synthesis of disparate elements, of meaning, emotion, image, it is a celebratory concordance to our dictionary of experience. Poetry is an act of metaphysics. Architecture as poetry

8. S.T. Coleridge (1927) p. 166.

must then show its connections to a mind, must synthesise all its separate principles into one violent statement about desires, histories and their meaning, the future, hope and the understanding of nature. Poetry is the construct which binds the building to the ideas and values with which it is associated, it is the synthesis of our divisive metaphysics, resolving the hermeneutic dilemma by tying everything which had fallen apart by a new understanding, together again into an impression of wholeness.

Poetic architecture then, as far as Garbett is concerned is that architecture which is made sacred by being able to represent past achievements which he and his contemporaries have projected as desires:

Whoever wanders among the hundred columns of the great hall of the temple of Karnac; whoever, by assistance of designs or models, and of the fragments in the British Museum, restores and rebuilds in his mind's eye, the small but glorious temple of

*the Athenian goddess; whoever climbs the ruined stairs of the Colosseum, to the edge of its artificial crater; whoever enters the cathedral of Amiens, or walks round the exterior of that of Salisbury; whoever views any of these works of architecture, and finds no poetry in it, must be incapable of discovering it in anything else - in Nature or in Art.*⁹

9. *Treatise*, p. 32.