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GOLDSMITH AS EPISTLE - WRITER

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Goldsmith as Epistle - Writer

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Abstract – Goldsmith – a supreme epistle – writer - His two Works noted for Epistolary excellence - a model for epistle- writing - His epistles achieved the value of Literary Genre.

Keywords: Epistle, Genre, Technique, Literary, Self –portraiture

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Among British Epistle – writer, particularly in the genre of prose, Oliver Goldsmith occupies the supreme place for its exquisite narrative technique and its innovative form. “The Citizen of the World” and “An History of England” contains letters which provide the reader instruction on various matters dealing with the life and events of England.

Johnson praised his “History of England” for “telling the reader shortly all he could want to know; and written in a style that would bear frequent re-perusal.”

Montesquieu used the technique of the pseudo letter and the foreign observer as a basis for an essay series. So Montesquieu profoundly influenced Goldsmith in the matter of ideas and format for the “Chinese Letters” which later have been collected in a volume entitled “The Citizen of the World”. In his format there is a Chinese visitor Altangi who writes letters to his people in China.

Regarding his “The Citizen of The World” it is a series of letters purporting to be written to his friends in China by a Chinese Philosopher named Lien Chi Altangi who was on a visit to England and who described what he observed of English life. They were collected together in a series entitled “The Citizen of the World”. “They are in effect a series of whimsical or satirical comments on English customs and peculiarities on the mental and moral characteristics of the race and on literary subjects, together with character sketches and episodes”.

We come across excellent essays in “The Citizen of The World”. Summing up about these essays, David Daiches in his ‘A Critical History of English Literature-volume II, elucidates thus:“These are supposed to have been written by a visitor from China, who comments, often with ironical humour, on the English scene. The irony is neither subtle nor bitter, and the essays reveal their author’s combination of gaiety and

moral earnestness, personal feeling and formal wit, which sometimes suggests the familiar essay of the nineteenth century, though it is never so exhibitionist or self-consciously subjective. In these and other essays, Goldsmith’s moralizing is sometimes heavy-handed, sometimes verging on the sentimental, but their geniality, ease of movement, and what might perhaps be called their purity of tone give them a charm that is not often found in the essays of the mid-eighteenth century.”

Many of the characters in the Citizen of the World have become household names particularly Bean Tibbs as well as Mrs. Tibbs. Two essays namely “The Man in Black” and “City Night Piece” and remarkable for their incisive comments and poignant feelings.

“The Man in Black” is described to be a reflection and self –portraiture of the writer. His “City Night Piece” is the articulation of the mute agony of the lowly and the lost. Every line exhales the anguish and agony of the writer at the pathetic sight of the wretched, miserable poor people. His heart if full of tenderness sans the capacity to relieve their suffering. The essay melts even a hard-hearted man and a shylock would turn into a Good Samaritan after reading this essay.

His response to the poor reminds us of King Lear’s pathetic cry at the sight of hapless poor in the biting cold:

“Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, how shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you from seasons such as these?”

Thus Goldsmith is not only a great poet, novelist, essayist but even an admired epistle – writer too. In

his hands, the epistle attained the status of Literary Genre.

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