POETRY AND INTELLIGIBILITY

LUMINOUS shadow and dusky light.—We, who are not poets, but who dare to maintain that poetry is an essential element of our intellectual life, are just now the somewhat helpless witnesses of a discussion in which we are not invited to take a part; a discussion of experts; and yet a discussion in which we are deeply interested even if we be kept outside it.

There are two parties to that discussion; one for whom poetry has, essentially, no relation to thought, but springs from an emotion of the soul of the poet which he transmits to his hearers in words, indeed, but not in any kind of definite thought; the other, and older school, for whom thought is not, indeed, the whole of poetry, but is certainly one of its elements, and is of its very essence.

To take, first, the former school, as presented by one or two of its leading advocates.

Mr. A. E. Housman says: *The human faculty which dominated the eighteenth century and informed its literature was the intelligence, and that involved, as Arnold says, 'some repressing and silencing of poetry.'* And again: *When I examine my mind and try to discern clearly in the matter, I cannot satisfy myself that there are any such things as poetical ideas.*[1]

Again, although it is almost impossible to find *pure unmingled poetry, poetry independent of meaning, yet meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not.*[2]

It is a corollary, an inevitable one, of this elimination of the intellect *qua* intellect from the domain of poetry that we have to appeal, for the apprehension of poetry, to a special, a peculiar, a far from common faculty of sensibility, not only in the poet, but in all or any who pretend to read poetry and feel it as poetry, and not as versified or rhythmical prose; in all who are capable of receiving into

[1] *The Name and Nature of Poetry.*

[2] *Idem.*

their own spiritual lungs the *afflatus* from the soul of the poet. So that it would seem, if we work the matter out to its logical conclusion, that the reader, in the measure of his apprehension, would need to be equal, in poetical sensibility, to the poet himself; the originating faculty may not be there, but in so far as the words of the poet convey to him the emotion of the poet he must be possessed of a corresponding sensibility.

Very pertinent, in such case, is the question of Mr. A. E. Housman, with its answer: *Do I possess the organ by which poetry is perceived? The majority of civilized mankind notoriously and indisputably do not.*[3]

The late Abbé Bremond who, in his own very special way, advocated the same idea, answers with a simple 'Allons donc'; the suggestion that the plain man can grasp the fruit of poetic genius.

It would seem, then, that the human soul differs from the human body in this important respect that, whereas every complete human body possesses the same organs, though varying in perfection and intensity in different people, the human soul of the poet, and of those who are poetical enough to receive his message, possesses an organ not granted to the soul of the ordinary man. And this, not from mental inadequacy, but because the mind, or intellect, is not the instrument of poetry. For in proportion to its purity of character will poetry be less burdened with meaning, in the intellectual sense. It cannot be entirely freed from the incubus, because both poet and reader are—if we may use such a word as applicable in the restricted discussion before us—*afflicted* with reason and intelligence, which interpose themselves, not as co-operating agents, but as a deviating medium between true poetry and the soul of poet or recipient.

To turn again to Mr. Housman: *I am convinced that most readers, when they think that they are admiring poetry, are deceived by inability to analyse their sensations and that they are really admiring, not the poetry of the*

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[3] *Idem.*

passage before them, but something else in it which they like better than poetry.[4]

Now this is obviously true in some cases, but the point in which I am interested is the supposition that this interest in what is called ' something else ' is, of itself, incompatible with receptivity as regards poetry in its true character.

Now in the writings of Abbé Bremond, who treated of this subject at some length in his *Poésie Pure* and *Prière et Poésie*,[5] we have the same philosophy but with a difference. For him the idea is not an element of poetry, but it has a place as *medium.* His treatment of the subject is based on the distinction he borrows from M. Paul Claudel between the *animus* and the *anima,* which he qualifies, respectively, as reason and poetry—the mind and the soul. When *Anima* would speak, she is *forced to borrow the lexicon of Animus,* but *without stripping* (words) *of their true property which is to represent ideas. She possesses the secret of harnessing them to her own ends . . . of breathing into them her own life.*[6]

Without the use of language the poet would be eternally silent, and he is not capable of silence; just in proportion to the intensity of the poetic *afflatus* is he driven to communicate to others his intellectually incommunicable experience. In his effort to breathe forth the ineffable he takes words, and he takes ideas, because he cannot take anything else, he possesses no other medium. But in virtue of this medium he produces in us—(that is to say, in that chosen few of us capable of response, for, like Mr. Housman, Abbé Bremond did not think the generality of mankind capable of such response)—a commotion, a transformation—a profound spiritual emotion which is the result of a kind of contagion, a passing of the experience of the poet to the soul of his reader.[7]

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[4] *Idem.*

[5] Grasset, Paris.

[6] *Op. cit.*

[7] For all this analysis see *Prière et Poésie*, Chap. vii. ' Le Romantisme et le restauration de la Poésie.' Grasset, Paris.

Now it would seem that since poetry does not exist to convey meaning, and since the poet has no interest in ideas for their own sake, and still less in facts, but simply stammers and struggles with them, in his endeavour after expression, meaning and ideas will be faint and obscure in proportion to the force of poetical inspiration. Words, indeed, have a sacredness of character that cannot be ascribed to ideas. For it is in words that the *current*—to use the favourite expression of Abbé Bremond—passes from the soul of the poet to the soul of his reader. The words, in this respect, are sacro-sanct; change a single one and the charm may vanish. Thus Abbé Bremond cites the line of Keats:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,

and tells us how Keats had first written:

A thing of beauty is a constant joy—

The difference, he remarks, is almost *nil* intellectually, but is absolute in relation to the conveyance of the poetical current.[8]

And yet one cannot help remarking that, if Keats changed the line from its first form, he must have done it *after* the first inspiration had passed.

And Mr. Housman gives us analogical comparisons.

From this Mr. Housman draws the conclusion that poetry seems *more physical than intellectual;* while Abbé Bremond who would certainly have repudiated a 'physical' conception of poetry, since he even objects to the term 'sensibility,' employs rather the comparison of a magical incantation. And this is surely a very apt comparison. For the incantation of the sorcerer, if repeated in faith, rocks the intellect to rest, and establishes a communication between the mind of the magician and the mind of his client in which reason slumbers and the will is subject and still.

If Keats had left us with *A thing of beauty is a constant joy,* the charm would not have worked. And if the witch told us to repeat over nine times *Akka Sonta Mozen Talki*

[8] See Chap. iv of same work.

and we said, instead, *Mozen Sonta Talki Akka* we could not prove her a cheat if the charm failed to work. And thus we understand a kind of instinctive preference, which can often be noted in contemporary criticism, for the poetry that evades comprehension; to explain is to desecrate; to draw a meaning or a lesson is to dress a spirit in the clothes of the body. This lack of comprehensibility is not the same thing as obscurity. Poets like Robert Browning were, in their day, deemed obscure, but not incomprehensible. We all tried to penetrate the obscurity to disentangle the hidden truth. With some modern poetry such an attempt would be proof of ignorance and misunderstanding. The obscurity itself has a sacred character, like the groves that surrounded an oracle. The poet has spoken, and, if he be a poet, and if we have the corresponding organ, our soul will respond to his soul, and the mind will be still.

Now there is one remark in Mr. Housman's lectures which seems to me at once in harmony and in disaccord with his view as a whole, and that is where he speaks of poetry as something in man *which is obscure and latent, something older than the present organization of his nature, like the patches of fen which still linger here and there in the drained lands of Cambridgeshire.*[9] This is in accord with his conception of the mystery and magic of poetry, but not with his restriction of poetical perception to a chosen number. If there be anything common to all the old fen country of England it must surely be the covered up remains of fen; and if there be anything common to human nature it must be those latent forces from which all human development has sprung.

And this introduces another point of view, based on the same notion that poetry is the expression of something ancient; though, in the mind of the writer we have now to consider, not ancient in the sense of an underlying present, coeval with the past of humanity.

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[9] *Idem.*

Mr. Clifford Bax, in his study of Leonardo da Vinci, points out the direct, simple and practical aim of portrait painting in pre-photographic ages. In those days, *painters did not have to justify their occupation . . . did not need to announce that their work should appeal only to a particular ' sense ' . . . which has no connection with the rest of a man's life.*

This does not mean that there is no emanation from the soul of the painter or the poet into his work—*the more intensity he feels while he is at work the more lastingly will he transmit a ghost of his personality to the materials which he uses.* This may be a somewhat mechanical view of inspiration, still it allows of the fact of inspiration.

But all art, simply *qua* art belongs *to an earlier phase of human society, to a level of the mind which is now becoming archaic.* And he goes on to indicate the allusiveness and learning of much modern poetry: *The practitioners and praisers of this school,* he writes, *are in reality as incapable of writing or appreciating poetry as of performing a savage war-dance. They are too old in mind.*[10]

And so he concludes that Leonardo was prophetic of a coming time, in his increasing tendency to an interest in science rather than art. Whether he proves this point or not is for those more competent than myself to decide; but he quotes some words from Leonardo which hardly bear out his contention:

Remember, wrote da Vinci, *that between the light and the dark there is something which partakes of both; luminous shadow or dusky light.* And again: *Remember, O Painter, that your strength is in solitude.*

And Mr. Bax comments: *Little wonder, then, if his paintings are nearly always inspired by an imperative need to escape from reality and the rough grain of life.*

I feel as though in these words, Mr. Bax had rather betrayed an unquenchable sense of the abiding value of art and poetry which does not wholly consort with his statement that they are *vestigial!*

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[10] *Idem.*

For Abbé Bremond poetry is the expression of *anima*, that is to say of the true deep self of the personality. It was Claudel who established the distinction of the *Animus* and the *Anima*—a distinction which Bremond interprets as that of the *I* and the *Me*—the former which lives and thinks on the surface, the latter the deep underlying personality, in touch with reality, in touch with God. For, of course, Bremond's main interest in the whole discussion was the kinship he claimed to find between poetry and prayer.

He holds that mysticism—or rather, mystic prayer, is the key to the understanding of pure poetry. It is in the science of the mystic that he finds the explanation of the mystery of the poet, but he goes on to establish a comparison of inferiority of the poet to the mystic, in so far as his very genius forces him to turn his sense of the infinite into human speech, whereas for the mystic it terminates in a union with the divine which proceeds to dominate the intellectual and volitional faculties, bringing the whole being into subjection to that supreme act of union. The poet must speak, it is his ineluctable destiny; but the mystic's term is union and silence.[11]

And now I want to transfer our study from these recent, or living, writers, to a great thinker of the past, to Lamennais and his immortal study of poetry and art. And if I do so it is because I think that in his philosophy we have, perhaps, a conception of the subject deep enough to underlie the conflicting theories of our day.

Lamennais was, from first to last, one of the conscious dwellers in immensity. I say conscious, because, though there is no other residence for any of us, the most of mankind are little awake to the vastness of the quarters in which they live. And because he believed that it is in the infinite that the soul of man truly lives and breathes, as the fish lives in the ocean and the bird in the air, so he persistently upheld, through all the lesser variations of

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[11] For all this see two last chapters of *Prière et Poésie*, Grasset.

his religious belief, that it is the infinite which explains the finite, and the understanding of God that is the key to the understanding of man. The past, by itself, evades explanation; the finite is hopelessly incomprehensible without the infinite; the many without the one; the contingent without the absolute.[12]

Not that the Infinite itself can be understood or proved, but it is there, inevitably there, irresistibly perceptible. And not only is our perception of the Infinite and Absolute the beginning and foundation of all knowledge, but it is the Infinite which is alone truly knowable, and the Infinite is God, whatever name may be given Him.

But the Infinite is also man, because the substance of every creature is radically the substance of God Himself, though it comes from God, not by way of emanation, but by creation.

The mystery of creation is for Lamennais, that participation by the creature of the Infinite Being of the Creator, in virtue of which the creature is both infinite and finite.

And yet man is not just a part of God. In virtue of his very limitations he possesses his own separate individuality. Hence the great contradiction of life—the incessant warfare of finite and infinite.

And thus arise all the problems of terrestrial and still more of human life. For until intelligence enters, with its principle of self-determination, the universe obeys, inevitably, the laws of Being within the laws of limitation. But with intelligence comes liberty, and a power of choice between the finite and the absolute. There are two warring tendencies, one towards God, the other towards self; one towards unity, the other towards separation; and for the complete life of the creature neither of the two must prevail. The tragedy of man's life is in this play of finite on infinite; creation is a kind of *déchéance,* it is the realization, in space and time, of the infinite type and ideal. All

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[12] For all this see *Esquisse d'une Philosophie,* F. Lamennais. Pagneux, 1846.

creation ' groans for deliverance '; and in moments of spiritual blindness and exhaustion we are, indeed, ' of all beings the most miserable.'

And now we come to his corresponding conception of the part that Art—and Poetry above all other Arts—is to play in the great contest. Art, like life, implies the two inseparable elements, the spiritual or infinite, the material or finite. And hence Art is subjected to one condition that can never be neglected, to one law that can never be disobeyed. That condition is that the finite should be expressive of the Infinite; that law is that the Infinite should prevail over the Finite. Hence the question of morality or immorality in Art is absorbed in one that is more vital and comprehensive. Art is what art should be so long as it aspires continually to the Infinite, seeking union therewith, seeking even identity, but seeking it vainly, because its very search is dependent on its limiting conditions, and because wholly to attain would be to perish and be lost.

And in this quest all forms of life may have their use, the vile as well as the noble, the hideous as well as the beautiful, for:

Ugliness . . . through which Eternal Beauty reveals itself in its relation to the True and the Good, may occupy a higher place in Art, may please, touch and move the soul more profoundly than simple beauty.[13]

For Lamennais, poetry is the substance of all art, wherein he differs from Schopenhauer, who attributed to music the highest and most direct expression of the great World Will. And poetry is the speech of the soul in its search for the infinite—the infinite without corresponding to the infinite within. Referring to the great poem of Job, he speaks of *the despair of infinite desire, which is at length transformed into . . . a faith which also is infinite.*[14]

In this conception of poetry we have a recognition of mystery without a repudiation of meaning. The mind is

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[13] *Op. cit,* Pt. II, Bk. VIII, Ch. I.

[14] *Idem,* Bk. IX, Ch. II.

conscious of its own inadequacy, of its inability to utter the message in its fulness; and yet, it believes that the message is utterable, and its struggle is as much with language as with idea. Of course the idea, as formulated, is inadequate, but so are the words; the idea is the stammering attempt of the mind, the words are the stammering attempt of the senses. Why should thought be denied a place that is granted to voice and sound? The supreme moment in poetry is one of rapture, but the soul can be rapt by thought as well as sound.

We know, well enough, that rapture can be wrought by the senses without any work of poetry or art—and such rapture may be, in its own way, revelatory of the spiritual and infinite. And in this way sensual rapture is closest akin to poetry in its purely emotional aspect.

But that which can be wrought by the body can surely also be wrought by the mind—' whether in the body or out of the body, I know not.' There is an element of infinitude in both poet and listener; poetry needs no separate organ in the one or the other, or poetry would not be human.

' Deep calleth on deep,' and it is from the depth of the soul of the poet that his thought and word find their way to the depth of the soul of his listener. To some in a greater or more continuous measure is the divine gift vouchsafed, but I wonder if there is not a moment, or if there are not moments, in the life of every human creature in which the voice of poetry is heard. For one thing seems to me to emerge clearly from this discussion, and that is, that the reader, or listener, in proportion to his responsiveness to the words of the poet, becomes, for the time being, himself, in some measure, a poet, though a dumb one.

And thus it seems to me that poetry is, in the first place, a quest—a search for the hidden life—a search for the buried reality, the divine reality according to Lamennais, which is the true self of each being. And it is a search in which both body and soul co-operate; the body through its senses, for if hearing is concerned, so is touch, the fundamental sense, in which the stirring of physical life is ex-

perienced; the soul, with every one of its faculties, memory, intellect, sentiment, though all of them subordinate to one great spiritual impulse, and all of them inadequate to its fulfilment.

It is a search in which, as St. John of the Cross would have it, the wanderer is driven forth into the dark night, urged by an instinct which is compounded of love and anguish. He is seeking for that which he knows, and, still more, knows not; which he hopes to find and knows he cannot find.

And besides being a search, it is also an escape, like every spiritual quest. It is an escape from the dreary round of material existence; from the feebleness of the understanding and the impotence of the will; from the disappointments of love and friendship, and the humiliation of being nothing better than one is; escape from 'the servitude of corruption into the liberty of the children of God.'

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A NOTE ON *POETRY AND INTELLIGIBILITY*

The search for a formula which would give poetry a 'recognition of mystery without repudiation of meaning' has for some time interested a student of St. Thomas who has had the good fortune to read Miss Petre's important essay in manuscript. Having been led by other masters to similar conclusions, he would, at the risk of bathos, if not of impertinence, add a postscript of his own.

The late Abbé Bremond's thesis that all art, including poetry, aspires to the condition of prayer is one of the most illuminating contributions to the subject that has been made. Yet it has seemed to the present writer that the Abbé's presentation of his thesis needed just some such correction as Miss Petre brings to it: a correction which would allow for a glimmering, at least, of light which brings poetry (and, indeed, prayer) within the range of intellect and dispenses with the special and esoteric faculty which has been invented for it. Poetic experience, not less than philosophical thought, protests that the age-long conflict of *Anima* and *Animus* is an intolerable one; that there should be no such conflict, still less the victory of one or of the