

ON POETIC KNOWLEDGE¹

THE history of the word 'poetry' seems to me most instructive. Only quite recently has it begun to mean poetry, in our sense; formerly it meant *art*, the activity of the productive reason, and in this sense it was discussed by Aristotle and Antiquity and by our own classical period. One might say that the word had gradually threaded its way through the body, so to say, of poetry and reached at last into its soul, to the point where it touches the spirit; so that from the metaphysician's point of view the perspectives have altered with time. This is the natural outcome of the fact that poetry has only recently, in the poets at least, begun to reflect on itself explicitly and deliberately. The reflection, once begun, is endless.

An increasing consciousness of the self is one of the main laws governing human history, and it arises directly from the nature of spiritual activity. According to traditional philosophy the mind is characterised by its ability to make a complete return to itself; the essential thing being not the return, but the grasp or penetration of self by self which accompanies it. Reflexion is of the essence of the spirit; it grasps itself by itself and passes right through itself. Hence, in culture, the general importance of the phenomenon of becoming conscious.

But because in man the spirit is substantially *one thing* with the flesh, in other words a very restricted spirit, this phenomenon takes place slowly in him and toilsomely, and not without checks and mistakes and misfortunes.

Whenever the mind tackles a really difficult task it only advances and gains new ground (especially in the field of its own inward spiritual world) at the cost of trouble and disaster. Man's very being seems threatened with disruption. Growing up brings crises which often end badly; they are, nevertheless, the crises of growth.

In France, poetry has known several such critical periods. The one in progress now is to me particularly interesting, and is accompanied by a peculiarly intense longing for self-knowledge. At such a time poetry has to work in two directions at once: it must continue to express itself creatively, and it must dwell introspectively on its own nature. Hence at the outset I think one may distinguish—summarily, of course, and with some risk of blundering in the appli-

¹ Translated from *Situation de la Poésie* by Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. (Desclée; 1938.)

cation—between two types of poet. (I say nothing here of the poets, sometimes very great ones, whose work completes and perfects an already *past* phase of the life of poetry; such is generally the case with 'great men').

At times, then, like the present there is one set of poets principally, though not exclusively, concerned with inward self-exploration, with the movement by or through which poetry becomes aware of itself. In a special way they are engaged with that experimental activity through which poetry works upon and renews itself, and grows, painfully and gradually, in time; and just because of this they identify themselves more particularly with all that is typical of their time. The other, contrasted group is more concerned to continue the poetic work itself, to carry on that age-long vocal utterance of which the Psalmist speaks. Less involved in the travail of historical growth, they are therefore the less restricted by the particular character of their period. Of course these preponderances are only relative, and may vary in all sorts of ways; for both groups share, in some degree, in the experiments and discoveries of their time, and in the growing pains; and both in some measure carry on the creative song.

That was a digression. What I should like to stress is that the phenomenon of becoming conscious is very far from simple. It involves a highly intricate process, and is beset by a host of secondary phenomena, accelerations, intensifications, regressions, time-lags. Genius too may add to the complication. Moreover, the process is discontinuous, with perhaps long delays between its successive moments.

I know quite well that even in the Reindeer Age (of which some of the drawings and sculptures betray the professional touch) the artist has always had some consciousness of his art. But compared with explicit consciousness fully awakened by reflexion, the 'concomitant' or implicit consciousness is still in a sense asleep. Now in the development of great literature there comes a movement when poetry, having done immortal things as it were in its sleep, with very little self-knowledge, (as a runner may now and then turn to look back) passes on to a more explicit consciousness, to a reflexive awareness of the strange spiritual and productive power that we call Art. It is a transient moment, swift and rare. It is a chance that must not be missed, for much is implied in it, a developed and fairly autonomous culture and a tissue of social, cultural, spiritual conditions—and then a great poet; the angels of history claim a great poet for this moment. If he be granted the moment is that of Aeschylus and Sophocles, of Virgil, of Dante; it opens the great classical periods.

After it, and often along with it, come the grammarians and rhetoricians and formalists.

In the literatures of Christian Europe—apart from the first Italian renaissance, with its miracle of Dante crowning the Middle Age with glory at the very moment when the Middle Ages totter and change, when already Petrarch is a literary man in the modern sense—it appears that the momentary transition I speak of was more or less obscured by circumstances due to the Second Renaissance. In England there was the moment of Shakespeare. In France the relevant phase extended over a fairly long period; the period of Ronsard and the *Pléiade* first, then that of Racine, with a very unsteady time in between.

When has French poetry ever been richer in the technique of its craft, in comely and precise forms for verse-making, than in the period of Charles d'Orleans, of Marot, of Mesnard, of Ronsard? It is the age of the *rondel* and the *sonnet*, of the *ballade*, the *virelai* and the *Chant royal*, of the poet who considers himself a craftsman first of all. One century later he will have become a grammarian.

In the *Pléiade* the defects associated with increasing self-consciousness take the form of an excessive use of erudition and a pedantry which, naive though it still is, makes one regret Villon. Later, once the French mind had sensed the dangers of artistic mannerism, and reacted against it in the name not of poetry, but of reason and nature, poetry was acutely imperilled; it never, in France, ran a greater risk. The 'reason' invoked was a lawyer's reason and then, very quickly, the reason of Descartes. In defiance of the imminent and prolific Baroque the cry went up: *Et maintenant ne quittons pas la nature d'un pas!* At the same time the grammarian mentality in its native abhorrence of poetry undertook, with ferocious single-mindedness, to sacrifice poetry to art, to an art reduced by rationalism to artificiality. Yet it is just at this moment of danger that poetry slips past the grammarians like a heavenly child through the doctors of the law; supple and sure and brilliant, the greatest glory of that great age of prose, the French seventeenth century.

After Racine and La Fontaine there is complete collapse. 'Any man,' writes the Abbé Terrasson, 'whose views on literature are such as Descartes has eliminated from Physics is unworthy of the present age.' But in the general ruin something survived: poetry had definitely become conscious of itself as an Art, however puerile might be the conceptualisation of this consciousness by the followers of the Abbé Terrasson.

Henceforth it has a thorn in its flesh: the question, what is art? Eighteenth century classicism gave a bad answer; its shallow clarity

distorting the traditional notion of art as right reason operative, or as intellect in its function of producer of objects.

The answer given by French Romanticism was a reaction, primarily; rejecting the true function of the operative intellect along with the preceding century's absurd conception of it. At the same time there was a most admirable deepening of the artist's consciousness. In Germany the romantics groped their way into the true kingdom of poetic reality, under a kind of veil of enigmatic metaphysics.

So by the time of Gérard de Nerval and Delacroix it had come to this, that the exploration of the artist's consciousness brought him at last into touch with something in the depths of himself, something enormous that art could not circumscribe, no more than the world could circumscribe God, something that seized you and swept you away into the unknown. And as the century proceeds the time comes when poetry starts to be conscious of itself *as poetry*. And then, in the course of a few decades, a series of discoveries, failures, disasters, revelations the importance of which cannot, I think, be exaggerated. And it only began what still goes on. This contact, in consciousness, of self with self, this spiritual reflexion, was needed that our poetry might be set free. Myself I think that what has happened to poetry since Baudelaire is, historically, as important in the sphere of Art as, in that of Science, are the greatest periods of revolution and renewal in physics and astronomy.

I suppose the situation of Baudelaire would be pretty accurately represented if one were to say that, whereas he seems to be continuous with the best elements in Romanticism by that deepening of the consciousness of *art* of which I spoke, he is really discontinuous, he marks a crucial transition because, in addition to that and at the same time, the object of the poet's consciousness in him is *poetry itself*, poetry become aware of itself *as poetry*.

Self-consciousness, in this sense, is immensely important in him, and he often dwells on it. 'Short of a miracle,' he writes, 'a critic cannot become a poet, but a poet is inevitably a critic.' He suffered continually from this consciousness of being a poet. The *gouffre avec lui se mouvant* is precisely the mysterious self-knowledge of poetry; it is this that puts such amazing power into his sometimes quite proaic lines. Think how often he refers to it, for instance in the first poem of the *Fleurs Du Mal*:

*Lorsque par un décret des puissances suprêmes
Le Poète apparaît en ce monde ennuyé,
Sa mère épouvantée et pleine de blasphèmes
Crispe ses poings vers Dieu, qui la prend en pitié. . . .*

or in a famous passage taken almost word for word from Edgar Allan Poe—but Baudelaire had the right to consider that he and Poe had all things in common: ‘It is this deathless sense of beauty that makes the world and the sights of the world seem like a glimpse of heaven, as *corresponding* to heaven. The unquenchable thirst for what lies beyond all that this life shows us is the liveliest proof of our immortality. It is both by and *through* poetry, by and *through* music that the soul half-glimpses the splendours beyond the grave. And when some exquisite poem moves us to tears, these tears are no proof of an excess of joy. They testify much rather to a kind of nervous melancholy, to the fretful, irritable insistence of a nature in exile, insisting that on this earth, here and now, paradise be revealed to it.’

Modern poetry derives from Baudelaire its sense of the quasi-theological quality of poetry, of that despotic spirituality in it whose name for him was still Beauty.

As I wrote in an earlier essay, ‘The chief function of Baudelaire and Rimbaud has been to lead modern art across the boundary line of the spirit. But here, over the frontier, you encounter the greatest perils, poetry encounters the great metaphysical issues, here the angels are at war, the good against the evil’².

Lautrémont I do not consider a good angel, certainly not a guardian angel. He excels in the wizardry of pride, with its consequences in hatred and spitefulness, or rather in the distilled essence of spite, in its pure detached activity. Nor was Rimbaud a good angel, nor Baudelaire, though Baudelaire was far more Christian than the other two; he was a jansenist Christian, almost a manichæan. But to poetry itself all that is irrelevant; it is concerned henceforth only to know itself.

At this point I shall have to attempt a distinction, schematic of course, between diverse moments in this search that is now become poetry’s obsession and that seeks an answer no longer to this question: *What is Art?* but to this: *What is poetry?* In this sense poetry is to art as Grace to the moral virtues; nor, in this sense, is poetry peculiar to the poets, nor even to artists generally, but may dwell perhaps in a simpleton who can only stand and stare and say a-a-a like Jeremias, who perhaps is driven to madness by it or to suicide, without ever having done or said a thing in his life.

In becoming conscious of poetry as poetry one of the first aspects to appear is connected, I think, with one of the special functions of art, its creation of objects. But this need and function is, by poetry, at once transfigured: no longer is it a question of fashioning a ‘work

² *Frontières de la Poésie*, 3e ed., p. 28.

of art,' as the Parnassians would have understood the phrase, but in creating a world, a self-sufficing universe identical with the poem itself and without any necessary relation to anything else, to any other thing signified, and into this world the soul must let herself be immersed blindfold so as to take in through the skin as it were, over the whole surface of the body, a dark outpouring that penetrates, one knows not how, even to the heart. *Je suis obscur comme le sentiment*, wrote Pierre Reverdy, and it is the obscurity of his poems. To feel their beauty—which is very considerable—you must first consent to this obscurity. And a similar *acceptance*, I mean a consent to the artist's intentions, is always required for the understanding of a work of art, and for the communication which this presupposes.

A further decisive moment in the increasing self-awareness of poetry has to do, I think, with the essence of the *poetic state* itself: poetry leads, apparently, into a mysterious and boundless region, infra- and supra-conscious, that calls for exploration and clarification.

Lecturing at Buenos Aires in the summer of 1936 Henri Michaux gave an excellent account of the purification which this difficult investigation requires, and of the pitiless introspection that has to be undertaken before poetry can lay bare the truth about its own proper substance and inspiration. Rhyme, rhythm, line, stanza, the whole apparatus of words and melody and human intelligibility of which the poem seems to consist, all this is an obstacle in the way, it is not what we are looking for. What does this mean? Must poetry, that we may touch it at all, be reduced to an impossibility, leaving nothing but some last speck of life sparkling on the edge of death? Or, rather, must we undertake a sort of negative theology in which the hidden essence of poetry is reached in an incommunicable experience, from which one would come back to the world of men with all one's means of expression changed and purified, burnt up inwardly, so to say, by a fire that might seem to have destroyed them, but in truth would have set free strange forces within them?

In the meantime the work itself, in so far as it expresses this introspection, must undergo a singular asceticism. It ceases to be a song (which it would naturally like to be) and becomes a certain revelation of the being of the poet in its hidden poetic activities. And naturally this revelation has to be esoteric; it must in a sense keep its secret too; it must reach our hearts through a labyrinth; for no other way is open to it.

To leave words behind, with all their cargo of falsehood and impression, of parasitical associations and connotations, to leave words behind or forge new ones or utterly transform the old, this is to re-

ject the normal play of ideas and concepts, of rational, social, human life and so pass into a wild world where we are naked and defenceless, it is ultimately in some sense to go right out from the human race—*aber ich will kein Mensch Sein*; for my part I choose not to be a man. . . . This is the great night, the quivering darkness, the longing to lose one's being.

So much for the second aspect or phase of consciousness of poetry as poetry, concerning principally what I call the poetic state. I wish now to distinguish, as I think one can, at least in the abstract, a third and still deeper aspect which relates particularly to *poetic knowledge*, to that knowledge, I mean, proper to poetry or to the poetic spirit, of the reality and inwardness and 'other side' of things.

The deeper the poet's self-awareness the more he is aware of a certain capacity to *know*, of a certain movement that takes him strangely close to the centres of being.

Here we touch the crux of the discussion and are involved in some uncommonly difficult philosophical questions; which, however, it would be cowardly to evade. But before going further we should note with regard to these three moments or phases, that they relate to diverse characteristics of the growth of poetic consciousness, not to different moments in time. They can happen all at once. Rimbaud for example flung himself right at the start into the third and final 'moment,' that of poetic knowledge, leaping into the very heart of the flame.

(TO BE CONCLUDED).

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Translated by Kenelm Foster, O.P.