

TRUTH AND POETRY¹

And he brought them to Adam to see what he would call them.

WHEN Adam was invited by God to name all the animals, he was the first poet. Thus poetry is as old as mankind, and fundamental to man. Adam had a head, a heart and five senses: he was a perfect man and could sing. Adam the poet, when he named the animals, did not give them their scientific names, studied by genus and difference: no, he beheld the marvels of creation, he loved them, and he cried out the music of their names. And the sons of Adam also have intelligence, desire and sensation as their father had, they also have the experience and love of Creation, and—*amantis est cantare*—they will also always sing of it. For man, endowed with the power of speech and song, will not rest with experience. His experience will overflow, he will always be ready to speak of what he loves, he will make something drawn out of himself, that self which has somehow been transformed by the love-experience, and spontaneously will say the Thing that he has got to know and to love. From the day when the first man called out the names of the living things of the earth, the heart of man has continued to utter a good word—*eructavit cor meum verbum bonum*, as the poet hath it—echoing the refrain of that first divine poem: “And God saw that it was good.”

In this whole question there enter complex philosophical questions, and in their book M. and Mme. Maritain have studied them. First of all the intellectual, and so intelligible, nature of poetry must be preserved. The mind of man is constantly in contact with Being, and his thought is always

¹ à propos of the publication of the latest book of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: *Situation de la Poésie* (Courrier des Iles series, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris). A collection of four essays: *Sens et non-sens en Poésie, Magie Poésie et Mystique*, by Raïssa Maritain; *de la Connaissance Poétique, L'expérience du Poète*, by Jacques Maritain.

keyed upon Being. But man is not only an intelligent creature, he is also a creature of sense: he has experience of concrete things through his sense and imagination. His scientific conceptual knowledge comes through the senses to the mind, but the senses are only the instrument or channel: the words heard, for example, are merely means of receiving the idea into the mind. In poetry, however, the idea is indeed received into the mind, but the senses have a more proper part: the very words are a delight in themselves, a delight to the ear, and so, the senses in the human organism being as it were penetrated with mind, in one complex experience, a delight to the whole person—a whole human delight: “une résonance intelligible.” Yet poetry, or music or all the arts, always represents a Thing; and at the same time the words, or melody or design, are a Thing in themselves and not merely a sign.² In this sense, poetry, being about a Thing, is an affirmation of Truth, and being a real Thing in itself, is a true thing itself.

Yet, Poetry speaks not of the thing merely as true: poetry is not only concerned with knowing and expressing the true thing—poetry adds its own music and sees the thing as beautiful. “And God saw all that he had made, and behold it was exceeding good.” When it is said that a thing is good, it is meant that it is lovable, for it is goodness that attracts love. But to see that it is good connotes a simultaneous sight and love that is the appreciation of the Beautiful.³ The old definition of the beautiful is *id quod visum placet*: that which is good to look at, that which when seen is good and pleases. The poet then is one who sees the love in it. And he loves it because it is beautiful, because he has appreciated it in its wholeness, through mind and sense, and has found it exceedingly good—a whole delight.

And so it is that poetry is of the whole man. It is founded upon an immediate Love and Knowledge⁴ of God's

² *Situation*, p. 15, p. 21. (R. Maritain).

³ cf. Fr. Leonard Callahan, O.P. *A Theory of Esthetic*, (Washington, D.C., 1927), p. 53.

⁴ cf. Fr. Thomas Gilby, O.P., *Poetic Experience*, chap. 5.

Creation—*seen* to be *good* and vividly appreciated at once by mind and sense with concomitant delight in both these faculties.⁵ “The experience of earthly beauty—the release of the whole person into activity and delight.”⁶ Now it is the particular thing that the senses apprehend, and love inclines to the particular good; and it is by this elemental knowledge through the senses, together with the inclination of love and delight in the whole, that we receive the immediate poetic experience,⁷ the intelligent knowledge of the particular delectable thing, “an intuition with a pronounced ‘feeling-tone’ ”⁸ It is by this interaction, this complex experience, that we understand the concrete real, the particular singular lovable thing, the fleeting moment, the unique situation. In this way comes that deep almost inexplicable appreciation of a glimpse of colour, a distant sound, a full silence perhaps. These things are often so transient: a particular moment of harmony in a symphony, unspoilt and ecstatic: a word in a sermon: this morning’s first ray of dawn upon the orange-tree in the garden: an exultant instant of speed: a golden moment with a friend. These things are known with all their particular circumstances and appreciated in all their particularity. Hölderlin thought these the most “real” moments of life.

Yet such experience, though intensely real, “close to the very springs of Being,” is obscure, intangible, ineffable; difficult to see, all but impossible to express—for words are all general terms, words cannot capture the particular moment; yet poetry is seeking to express it. For the poetic experience is a complete psychological process. Every impression on the mind calls for a corresponding expression of the idea: even if only a mental formulation (*verbum mentale*) which is the conclusion of the process of understanding—the essence of the thing is registered in the mind. But “poetic experience is not ordained to grasping the

⁵ cf. Jacques Maritain, *Art et Scolastique*, chap. V; and Fr. Callahan, p. 54.

⁶ Fr. Gilby, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁷ *Situation*, p. 126 sq. (J. M.), cf. Fr. Gilby, *op. cit.*, chap. 9.

⁸ Fr. Callahan, p. 53.

essence—no, it is ordained to saying the Thing.”⁹ Thus poetry is a creative intuition, a groping understanding of Self knowing, and Thing known, by a knowledge of intuition only expressible in the *work*—the thing said.¹⁰ Hence accurate is the American’s rejoinder to an impressive declaration: “You’ve *said* it.” The Thing has been said.

The poem then, or the work of art, is an affirmation of the True (known), the Good (loved) and the Beautiful (known, loved and said). But it is the particular concrete truth, the special true situation that is represented; not just imitated, but represented as it were reflected in human experience. And once represented, put into words, it becomes universal: like the Parables, which represent very particular situations, but, put into words, become expressions of universal experience. But a poem as such is not for instruction. In itself it is not a useful thing, any more than is the application of the mind to contemplation, or the application of the whole person to a game. Yet these things have their effect, and the mind is ennobled by the contemplation of Truth, and the man is improved by his game. So with Poetry: it is not instructive, but it is the overflow of human experience, and he who reads or listens or beholds shares in this experience. Probably he will find in himself that same experience in some other mode, unsaid. And thus man as a living loving creature is enriched.

Many have sought in poetry magic powers over their fellow-men; but no, that is not the power of poetry. Rather is it akin to the device of the Preachers *Contemplata aliis tradere*: to draw others, by letting them share, to an understanding of the deep experience of life (for the preacher’s place is not merely to instruct). For the mystic and the poet have much in common, though they remain far apart. The mystic will become more and more absorbed in the divine, and detached from the sensible, and will tend to silent contemplation; whereas the poet, as such, remains on earth, conscious of his humanity, and will ever seek humanly to

⁹ *Situation*, p. 147. (J. M.)

¹⁰ *Situation*, p. 102. (J. M.)

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speak through his frail medium. Still, the poet, with his mind attuned to Beauty, will perhaps turn to seek for the Everlasting Beauty of God: he also may have a glimpse, and will find that only in this contemplation does the experience of earthly beauty reach its fullest meaning. A creature can only be really understood in relation to the Creator. And the poet's always hesitant expression will now falter. *Nec lingua valet dicere, nec littera exprimere.* Even in human things there is sometimes a perfection, a beauty, a delight, where explanation is impossible, where words are a distraction, where but a Sonata may say it. And the poet, or artist, or musician, on his knees before the Eternal Perfection, will still speak his word of love, though helplessly. Helpless like the jubilum of an Alleluia: for when the word of praise to the Highest has been uttered, what more can be said? More can but be sung.

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