

## ON POETIC KNOWLEDGE (III.)<sup>1</sup>

The experience of Rimbaud was too drastic to serve as an object-lesson. In spite of him and *Une Saison en Enfer* the same error went on—an error of aim or direction, a false deflection of energy; and this despite the fiercest and most vaunted efforts to see more deeply into poetic consciousness. But now there was to be no full-stop; now the journey, it was presumed, was to go on and on to the world's end and beyond; down a track that led nowhere, in a train that could not move. And this, in a way, *can* be done: in a sort of dream, thanks to a sort of magic.

Because it tries to make use of poetry to fulfil man's desires and his search for knowledge and his hunger for the absolute, surrealism has for us a special historical importance.

Remember the remark of Marcel Raymond—to which I have already referred—'to declare the game not yet over, that all might still be saved from the wreck, was the essential message of surrealism.' But in fact the surrealists too fell victims to poetic knowledge. At first they were above all concerned to rediscover what Raissa Maritain, in the first of the essays in this book, calls 'That river in the mind underlying all our ordinary activities, that deep, authentic indefinable reality, perceived by the soul from time to time when she opens herself to the unknown and is revived thereby.' And I doubt not they did enjoy some moments of high ecstasy (in the natural order) when the soul 'bathes once more in the spring of her being, is refreshed and strengthened,' by the poetic experience. No need to refuse them this much good fortune. It is just this that ennoble<sup>s</sup> their enterprise and makes a deep tragedy of it. Even as they surrendered to introspection it came to them, as they turned away from the work and song of poetry and drove back recklessly down the mazes of consciousness. But the snare caught them. Having torn poetry almost entirely away from the purposes natural to it, they tried to make it a means to pure knowledge, a scientific instrument or a method in metaphysics.

And not only with metaphysics did they confuse it, but with morality also, and even with holiness; laying thus a burden on it greater than it could bear. Its power to seduce and to charm

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from *Situation de la Poésie* (Desclée; 1938). Cf. BLACKFRIARS, November and December, 1944.

remained, but could serve no purpose now but to dazzle us with brilliant tricks, unveiling a tinsel world of shams.

Because, in short, the surrealists mistook the passivity of psychic automatism for the passivity of poetic experience, they thought that the best way to poetry, indeed its one and only source, was the liberation of images, a setting free of the content of emotions and dreams accumulated in the animal subconscious, thronged as it is with desires and symbols. Hence in the poets of this generation there developed a very remarkable talent, almost an instinct, for concealing their tracks with disconcerting surprises and shocks that stimulate the imagination—and how well this swift allusiveness compares with the classical *discursus*! But in itself and left to itself it is only another technique, a cleverness, an accomplishment.

From all this and from the history of the surrealist delusion I conclude that poetry's advance to self-consciousness, like that of all other human activities, brings in the possibility of error. As I said at the beginning, the risk cannot be avoided if the human mind is to live and grow. Yet to imagine that becoming self-conscious, growing through reflection, were essentially bad and perverse would be to fall into a sort of manichaeian pessimism which in any case is completely unreal if reflection be truly something essential and native to the mind. Besides, these very errors bring with them new discoveries.

Not to know what you are doing may be the way to fine and generous action, especially when the self-forgetfulness is due to an impulsion from above. But again, not to know what one is doing can lead to the greatest crimes (and also to forgiveness for them). On the whole and other things being equal, it is better, however dangerous, however great the risk of incurring penalties, *to know what one is doing*.

At all events we have no choice. When the age of naivety has gone it has gone for good. There is no alternative but to make our growth in consciousness a better and purer one.<sup>2</sup>

. . . . Yes, poetry is ontology; it might even be called, as Boccaccio finely called it, theology—but in this sense only that, in the soul, it comes to birth at the central point of its being—where it is most original<sup>3</sup>—which point it reveals, in a sense, by its own creative movement. The unconscious whence it proceeds is not, save in a secondary sense, the Freudian unconscious of instinct and image, it is something deeper and more vital than that, the

<sup>2</sup> I have omitted here three pages of the original.—*Transl*

<sup>3</sup> . . . elle prend naissance dans l'âme aux mystérieuses sources de l'être . . .

unconscious of the mind's centre and of the *source* of its vital activity—hidden from the discursive reason in that depth of the soul whence all its powers derive.

In a word, the poet who is docile to his gift is brought back towards the wholeness of his being, if only he allows himself to be purified and so enter into himself. I think that such a theory of wholeness or rather of integration, not through a concentration of the will but through the quiet, creative repose of poetic knowledge untampered with, is congenial to the state of poetry at the present time, for it answers to that purer and more truthful self-consciousness which the poets may reasonably be thought to have gained now.

There is no question of belittling the rôle of the intellect or of intelligibility, or the importance of human experience to the poem, or of the conscious philosophy which may be worked into it and especially into certain types of poem. I mean only that the flame of creative intuition must be lively enough to consume these materials and not be smothered by them. In Shakespeare for instance, discursive lucidity is an integral part of the poetry, but it and all the reasoning and the acquired knowledge that goes with it, have been taken back to a hidden source of refreshment to be there transfigured and vivified and made identical, if I may so express myself, with a sort of *creative activity*, because they are transformed into poetic knowledge. Within that interior source common speech and commonplace ideas drop their usual pettiness and verbosity, because in a certain way they are reborn there a second time. Then and then alone the poet need be neither afraid of language nor scornful of it, for it is born again of him and in him, as in the Earthly Paradise on the first morning.

The conclusion suggested by these considerations may be given in words written on another occasion<sup>4</sup>: 'For the development of the life of the mind as creative, in a manner consonant to its being, the centre of its subjectivity must grow in depth; that centre wherein it awakes to itself through being acted upon by realities both outside and within the soul . . . creative activity is linked to different levels within the soul's substance, and through that activity each level declares itself, and the more the poet grows the deeper is the descent of the creative intuition into the dark centre of the soul.' And at the same time the more the poet simplifies himself, throws off his masks, is content to declare what he is, the more he will appreciate common humanity. The whole question

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<sup>4</sup> *Frontières de la Poésie (La Clef des Chants)*, pp. 199-200.

for him is to have, along with a sufficiently dextrous art, a sufficiently deep soul. The art can be learnt, but the depth of soul cannot; sorrow itself cannot teach this.

A few years ago, in an important essay on 'melody,' Arthur Lourié wrote that modern music had lost melody to the same degree that modern poetry had lost lyricism. What he meant by 'melody' in that essay was something set apart in its own order, developing through time but distinct from time and born out of the breaking of temporal connections. 'Melody,' he wrote, 'is not involved by any action, nor does it lead to action. It is an end in itself. The *motif* justifies an action; the *theme* is a means to the development of an idea. But melody serves no end. It simply *liberates*. Which is to say that melody is the very essence of music, being the revelation of the inward being of the musician. There is in poetry an element of the same kind, the spirit of the poem, the actual revelation of the poet's intimate self, identical in fact with poetic knowledge. But it is not true, I think, that modern poetry has lost this element. It has disguised it more or less, it has not cared to make a show of it. But it searches for it, seeks to grasp it, in the very act of grasping itself in consciousness.

In France at the present time<sup>5</sup> there is a remarkable amount of poetic activity, and I know several young poets whose work gives me great confidence in the future. Their task, I think, will be to set free that 'element,' that spring of living water born of the spiritual depths of personality and revealing, like melody; 'that which is, in its undisguised essence,' and not 'the falsehood imagined by the author.'

The essential condition, not without its danger for those who dare attempt the task, is that the spring whence the waters flow should be so *true* and so deep that it can bear along with itself and re-vivify all that amazing tangle of image-vegetation whose secret the poetry of the past twenty years has mastered for its own profit, but which in itself is only a material factor. Should modern poetry become more ontological, embrace being more closely, with all its human and earthly realities (and perhaps the Divine reality too), this will not be through any irrelevant preoccupations, nor through a wealth of good intentions, but only through the lyric element, the hidden thing, almost as hidden as Grace, whose deep source is the soul's creative centre.

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Translated by KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. 1938.