

THE POET AS PHILOSOPHER

ALEXANDER M. KINGHORN

The poet shares with the philosopher the claim that he is equipped to seek truth. For the poet, "truth" is truth of feeling, and the implication of all attempts to define poetry is that its concern lies with emotional states and objects. Aristotle, who was deaf to the wizardry of words, said that poetry is "imitation"; Longinus, on the other hand, held that poetry is an end in itself and declared that "truly beautiful words are the peculiar light of thought"; Wordsworth defined a poem as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge" and again as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; Matthew Arnold, writing on Wordsworth, explained that poetry is "at bottom a criticism of life" and has a social function; A. E. Housman suggested that the function of poetry is "not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer"; I. A. Richards indicates that every poem has its own unique definition which only requires the perfect critic to perceive it. Behind all such critical statements lurks the assumption that there is some quality in poetry that is not to be accounted for on a wholly intellectual level.

The philosopher, on the other hand, holds that truth, which he calls by various names such as the Right, the Good, the Ultimate and so on, may only be reached by means of discursive reason from which all personal emotion is excluded. In mediaeval times, Aristotelian philosophy dealt with human wisdom as distinct from supernatural revelation; English philosophers from Hobbes to John Stuart Mill were moralists who applied the methods of natural science to human affairs and tried to develop an instrument for social criticism; Kant aimed at a systematic presentation of the world and fashioned knowledge in accordance with scientific method; Marxist theory regards truth as practically demonstrable and knowledge as action. Philosophical positions, like definitions of poetry, vary a great deal, but they are all to be regarded as stepping-stones to the truth. It is usual to consider philosophy as "rational" and poetry as "intuitive" and a poet as one in whom those truths rest which a philosopher, toiling with reason, may fail to elicit in a lifetime of contemplation. For example, a philosopher may try to define the quality of jealousy by means of abstract statements, but the poet will present a picture of a man being jealous — not any man, but a creation of the poetic imagination embodying the idea of jealousy gleaned from the poet's own personal and intuitive experience of life. Even Plato, who banished poets from his ideal state and

governed it by philosophers, came to admit this toward the end of his life, by which time the moral and metaphysical objections to poetry developed in the *Republic* had been mellowed. His pupil Aristotle conceived the poet as capable of clearing away irrelevancy and, by using the particular to illustrate the universal, of conveying the one along with the other. In denying his master's belief that reality is transcendental and by perceiving it to be immanent, Aristotle formed an alliance with the poet.

It follows that if it be the poet's business to communicate his experience, whether it be of thought or of action, in comprehensible terms, then he must impart a body and a colouring to his message. His poetic ability may be judged on how fully he clothes his thoughts and on the degree of inspired feeling that lies behind them; the current tendency is to demand something "solid" in poetry and to welcome the poet whose appeal is predominantly cerebral. Not so long ago, consciously didactic poetry was considered repellent, and philosophy was deemed to have no place in the realms of unguarded fancy into which the poet's intuition was wont to lead him. The quarrel between the two is fundamental in the history of criticism: we recall that Plato's ideal state excluded poets but was dominated by philosophers; that Chaucer admitted his fear of speculative flights; that Spenser deliberately undertook to write philosophical poetry while his friend Sidney was of the opinion that no poet could be a philosopher; that Boileau considered that Cartesian philosophy had cut the throat of poetry by stressing the reason at the expense of the imagination; that Coleridge thought the poet a great philosopher although, like all the Romantics, he prided himself on being a poet and professed a distaste for logical argument at the same time that he indulged in it; that Arnold proposed that only poetry is real and philosophy illusory, but conceded that a poet such as Wordsworth could be properly appreciated only through a discussion of his formal philosophy. *Quot homines, tot sententiae*. In our own time the poet has come to distrust the unrealisable and to devote himself to the evolution of practicable schemes for escaping the physical and mental horrors of the modern world. Poetry today tends to become a sounding-board for privately-held versions of familiar political or theological systems. Thus we have Communist poets, Anglo-Catholic poets, Scots Nationalist poets and so on, each of whom is to a greater or lesser extent dominated as an individual and as a poet by the compulsion to disseminate propaganda for his particular cause.

When we talk about a "philosophical" poet, however, we usually mean a poet whose Muse operates with reference to a definite system, either wholly or partly of his own conception, as with Lucretius, Dante, Blake, or Wordsworth, or adapted from the findings of others, as with Spenser or Milton. The inference is always that his philosophy and his poetry are united insofar as the aim of both is truth, but may be technically separated, since no poet is capable of being consistently and continuously "poetic." Poetry takes a fact and envelops it in emotion evoked by a previous experience, whereas versified thought is unadorned statement, unemotional and unimpassioned. Wordsworth's *Prelude* is studded with passages of the second kind — direct moral statements which, because they compel attention for their own sake, could well be expressed in prose. Of course, a poet's emotions cannot easily be separated from his thought, nor would there be any point in trying to speculate along such lines; but when the poet is uppermost, what he writes will be free of the obtrusively didactic. If it is not free, then it may be concluded that the philosophical part of him is in the ascendancy. An acquaintance with those whom we call "great" poets suggests that poetical truth eludes systematic criticism, just as the realisation of an ideal eludes the philosopher. Systems of reason or logic are transcended simply because the poetic world makes an even more positive appeal to the rational faculty than the systems are able to do. The critical function thus becomes limited to an attempt to assess the poet's capacity to perceive his world and to communicate his vision within the limits imposed by his own special art. When the poet threatens to overleap these boundaries, as, for instance, Blake and Dylan Thomas have done, the critic is often left behind to re-examine his own system of evaluation in the light of the new venture. After he has finished accusing the poet of "unnecessary obscurity," the critic usually settles down to find a means of clearing away the fog; nevertheless, the critical instrument must be capable of considerable if not unlimited extension, if it is not to lose touch with the more speculative ventures in poetry.

Aristophanes exclaimed that "the grown world learns from the poet"; when we read great poetry we find ourselves in the presence of "truth" in the sense of that which is acceptable to us in relation to the rest of our experience and to that felt by the poet himself. The last-named kind of truth is frequently referred to as "sincerity"; when a poet is said to be sincere it is assumed that his entire sensitivity is being employed to communicate his experience. Many poets who, like Dante, Spenser,

Milton, and the Romantics are fancied to have communicated permanent truths by means of a systematic philosophy which, for modern readers, may have little or no significance, have been praised by scholarly critics and erudite historians of literature for that very characteristic in them which is outmoded and non-permanent. "Mirror of the age" criticism is inclined to regard a poet's erudition as more praiseworthy than his capacity to seize constant human values, and it is inclined to overlook the possibility that he is introducing a kind of truth which has not been recognized by any of his contemporaries.

Yet an historical approach is none the less essential to a full literary appreciation. In the works of Spenser, and particularly in the *Faerie Queene*, there is no blatant division between poetry and philosophy for, on the poet's own evidence, they served the same end, namely, to teach and delight and lead to virtue. Although Wordsworth conceived a delicate vision of "Sweet Spenser, moving through his clouded heaven," the real Spenser was a shrewd diplomat and a profound thinker, whose choice of subject was governed by politics and scholarship and whose allegorical method enabled him to deal with real incidents and real people without actually mentioning contemporaries by name. In earlier poems, such as the *Hymnes*, he had prepared the philosophical background that supports the allegory in the *Faerie Queene*, the unity of which consists in a Christianised version of neo-Platonic love. In it, the poet recreates a vision of the world he feels and sees in his imagination, a world full of changing states of beauty created by God as a vehicle for His divinity; and he conveys certain of Plato's sublime myths in such a way that the "saturation" of his systematic philosophy is never left to stand by itself. By allowing himself full licence, in the manner of Renaissance pictorial art, to depict the physical passions that he perceived as heavenly, Spenser succeeded in the difficult task of illustrating in poetry how the pleasures of the mind's eye might be turned into a moral law.

Because Spenser was trying to create a beautiful work of art, he had to attend carefully to formal elements, that is to say, to such an arrangement of "poetic objects" as would satisfy his own and his readers' feeling for symmetry, harmony, and clarity, so that by being directed towards the eye, the ear, and the intellectual perceptions simultaneously, sound and sense might be made to merge into one. In *Epithalamion*, for instance, the canvas is a wedding-ceremony, and the poet's object was to communicate all the beauty that he himself found in the ritual of sacrament and in the moral motives connected with marriage.

One characteristic of Renaissance art was an interest in physical nature for its own sake, and Spenser was wont to lay great stress upon the physical, especially the human body. *Epithalamion* depicts the bride as beautiful, but then goes on to value mere bodily perfection at nothing unless it be accompanied by a corresponding beauty of soul. The poet's bride is "really" beautiful, since her moral character fits her physical loveliness. At the altar we have an earthly scene linked to Heaven, and we hear the song of the angels accompanying the church organ and the anthem of the choristers: "that all the woods may answere and your eecho ring." It is a picture of richness conveying an ideal conception of how marriage ought to be interpreted, and the poet's doctrine of Christian love in which the woman is idealised comes as a sharp contrast to the mediaeval doctrine of St. Augustine as well as to the courtly school of "bold bawdry."

Spenser's art reflects the Renaissance reaction against the kind of asceticism urged, for example, in *De Contemptu Mundi* and similar works popular during the Middle Ages — the conviction that this world is but a vestibule to the next and that man is set on earth to purify himself and be tested for entry into Heaven; such a ruling idea implied a turning-aside from Self and a concentration upon Spirit. The *Faerie Queene* deliberately sets out to sanctify worldliness and yet, in the name of the poetic art it stresses the impoverishment of man when cut off from his divine source. Donne and Milton both seized upon man-centred humanism as a fundamental error of early Renaissance thought, and their poetry reveals the tension between the actual and the transcendental. Donne moves from physical to spiritual, and the "metaphysical" supposition that Body is a vehicle for the experience of Soul may be traced through his serious love poems. Milton argues that the Fall resulted from man's selfishness, self-glorification, and a turning away from God.

The problem of reconciling humanism with theology was one which confronted — and to some extent baffled — the English poets of the period. Intellectual pressures made it difficult for them to make any rhapsodic plea for licence and to claim, "I do but sing because I must." Donne was perhaps the most emancipated member of the group, and he expressed himself with audacity and exultation, for the end of his art was the utterance of his own rebellion against Elizabethan poetic convention. All his poems were documents of his personal feeling produced according to the doctrine of "*L'art, c'est moi!*" However, the cynicism reflected in his earlier poems makes any attempt to extract a "philosophy" into a trivial pursuit, since Donne

studies to celebrate, not constancy like Spenser, but inconstancy, and displays less interest in the abstraction of love than in the relationship between lovers. Even when we come to his serious love poems, we find that his philosophy of love, if it exist at all, can hardly be said to have much profundity and might be described simply as a form of erotic solipsism. On such a concept, love is a union of identities that seems to obliterate all other ideas because they are contained within it. In "The Ecstasy," for example, the lovers are drawn together by the body while their souls rise and meet outside themselves. The bodies are entranced and act simply as the instruments of the soul; love "interinanimates" them and they unite. The idea is similar to that expressed by Browning in "Abt Vogler":

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,
All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,
All through music and me!

Such a doctrine provided a rational excuse for art. The "metaphysical" view that the physical is a vehicle for the experience of the soul was superficially acceptable to theologians who admitted that God has made Spirit known to us through Body, so that nothing in the world is so mean and so base as to be of no use as a means of grace, when "accident and substance," that is, appearance and reality, become as one. However, it did not entirely resolve the Puritan dilemma. Milton's argument that the didactic poet ought himself to be a true poem was characteristic of the "literary" solutions which English poets of the non-metaphysical school were inclined to offer by way of compromise. We may recall, also, that God's ways were justified to men in the end not by a ponderous theological argument, but rather by Milton's employment in *Samson Agonistes* of the Aristotelian device of catharsis to convey the idea that ultimate perfection and repose are, after all, the destiny of suffering mankind. Donne and his contemporaries of the "metaphysical" group, who were all High-Churchmen and drew their imagery and argument from the dogma of Catholic Christianity, were really more successful than Milton in maintaining a consistent position, since Milton tried to effect a strictly rational compromise at a time when in England as a whole the political and social climate prevented ideologies from blending.

In general, it can be said that seventeenth-century poetic art, notwithstanding the theological and secular limitations imposed upon it, retained a dependence on Dantesque metaphysic and age-old Catholic thought. Roman Catholicism encouraged a use of imagery which was completely lacking in the iconoclastic

Protestant régime, and religious and philosophical poets drew their vocabulary from Catholic tradition since there was no alternative vital source of terminology. Bereft of this means of expression, philosophical poetry declined after Milton's time and became philosophical verse, borrowing its language from the language of Newtonian physics or of philosophical prose. Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, for example, provided the material for Akenside's *On the Imagination*; Thomson leaned heavily on the new scientific methodology; Arbuthnot's *Know Yourself* looks back to *De Rerum Natura*. Considered as a whole, eighteenth-century verse suffered from the contemporary critical tendency to treat poetry as though it were a branch of rhetoric. The theoretical schematisation of rhetorical devices had little if any relevance to the production of poetry in the English tradition or, for that matter, to the recognition of original flights outside that tradition. The academic enthusiasm for imitating classical forms, with the aid of a vocabulary cold-bloodedly prescribed by critics who were not themselves poets, led nowhere but into the wilderness. Poetry and thought were put asunder until such time as poetic theory, founded upon poetic practice, joined them together again. This did not happen until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Romantics created their own poetic medium from the language of pagan and early Christian mythology and of visionary prose-writers such as Swedenborg and Burke.

Their central doctrine was one of social and spiritual liberty, and their conception of the poet singled him out as an inspired man whose exuberant genius seized the true values of humanity without artificial aids. They sought truth in a transcendental world, wherein the reality of things was revealed sometimes in moments of intense ecstasy, sometimes after long periods of imaginative contemplation. They were all conscious sufferers, emphasising transient moments of intense experience in a manner that recalls the words of the Chorus in *Antigone*: "For mortals greatly to live is greatly to suffer," and alternating flights "on the viewless wings of Poesy" away from the oppressions of humanity with periods of emotional hangover and self-pity. In their prescriptions for making poetry they stress not will-power, but revelation; Coleridge's "deep thought" and "deep feeling," Wordsworth's "wise passiveness," Keats' statement that "what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth," Shelley's definition of poetry as "the expression of the imagination" all reject deliberate concentration in favour of spontaneity. The common symptom of their works is one of adolescence, a process of mental growth and self-discovery; and in keeping with such an attitude to life, they created their own

individuality in the face of the existing order of things, resolving to journey through the world in their own way, "alone and palely loitering," experimenting as they went. External disciplines of various kinds such as parent-figures, universities, and the civil law, and internal disciplines such as logic and ethics, challenged this assertion of individuality. The Romantics saw them as the evil results of a corrupt society and therefore utterly inimical to the free spirit. Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" sums up this view in aphoristic form: "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings" and again "Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of Religion." In his "Prophetic Books," Blake symbolises established morality and restraining reason in the figure of Urizen.

All the Romantics prided themselves on being poets and professed a distaste for philosophy. In contrast, they held that life's fluctuations justify living and that intensity of feeling balances the transience of unfulfilled and therefore monotonous existence. As Byron remarked, "Man, being reasonable, must get drunk," and his contemporaries fill their poems with expressions of ecstasy and its depressing after-effects when the poet falls back to dismal reality. Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* sounds this typical note:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Shelley's "Alastor" and Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale" both contain similar passages:

Ah! thou hast fled!
The brave, the gentle and the beautiful,
The child of grace and genius.

and:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?

In order to communicate their unique experiences poetically, they were each inclined to construct a philosophical system for the sake of coherence and artistic unity. Though it may well be doubted whether it is any better to be circumscribed by a system of one's own making than by one prefabricated by an external authority, these poets remained faithful to their own principles inasmuch as they left interpretation indefinite. Byron in *Don Juan* declared that he had "nothing planned," and Shelley in "The Revolt of Islam" states plainly that although the poem contains a social message, its moral intentions are to be construed as freely as possible. Wordsworth "yielded up moral questions in

despair" (though not without a struggle), while Blake, writing for a more intimate audience, left his later readers to make what they could of his symbolism in any way they pleased. As he himself said, "Let the Philosopher always be the servant and scholar of Inspiration, and all will be happy." Such a position was to some extent justified — to later generations of critics at least — by the fact that Blake and Wordsworth, whose visions were more complete than those of Shelley or Keats, both became tangled up in their own systems.

The critical question that emerges from an acquaintance with the philosophical poets is surely this: do we read Dante, Spenser, Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley and the rest for their "poetry" or for their "philosophy" or for both? Clearly the answer depends on the kind of man who gives it. Arnold's definition of poetry as "a criticism of life" implies the didactic and philosophical in its broadest moral sense only, so that when a critic such as Eliot objects to Arnold's remark that "Poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion," he is not really offering a serious contradiction. All Arnold meant was that dogma in itself fails to convince in itself — an observation unlikely to appeal to a critic of Eliot's temper. Thus though Shelley painted ideals and Keats beauty, neither one tried to demonstrate the relevance of these to living society; instead, Shelley communicated his joy in fundamental things by means of a poetic expression born out of the spiritual values of that society. Such an appeal is not to the "aesthetic" or "moral" senses alone, or for that matter to any particular single analytical tendency in the human constitution. Formal attractions which can be considered in isolation and without reference to other qualities vary from one poet to another. All the greatest poems repay study as milestones of intellectual history; as examples of technique; as containing something which aestheticians have called "beauty," estimable on moral standards; as documents of an unchanging human nature, and so on.

In *Three Philosophical Poets*, Santayana inquires whether poets are searching, not for truth directly, but for a philosophy through which truth may be obtained; and he speculates on whether philosophy and poetry may not in the end be the same thing. He solves his own problem by distinguishing the preparatory process of abstract investigation from its end, "a steady contemplation of things in their order and worth," which is an imaginative process. When this state of mind has been attained, the philosopher and the poet are as one, and their long-standing difference loses its meaning. Each in his own way aims at discerning permanent human values and is therefore a deliberate or intuitive moralist as befits his profession.