

WHY POETRY?

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KNOWING SMILE, a sneer of contempt—these indicate a common reaction to the mention of poetry. The caricature of the poet as a long-haired, starry-eyed dreamer has become a commonplace of the magazine cartoon. Especially in these days of slide-rule precision there is little sympathy for the poet and his work. But this attitude was not born with the era of television. The Greeks were ahead of us in most of the ideas we have since explored, both true and false. Thus we find Plato in his *Republic* taking the measure of the poet with a sweeping condemnation. There were to be no poets in his ideal state. For him poetry was just a pack of lies, with no more relation to reality than the dreamers who concocted them. Homer and Hesiod with their false representations of the gods and heroes have a bad effect upon youth. Poets, indeed, are mere mimics, out of contact with reality.¹ In fact this dismissal of the poets was rather common among the Greeks, for we find Aristotle repeating this Greek proverb, "The bards tell many a lie."² A contempt for poetry, then, dates even from the Greeks. Perhaps some of the extravagances perpetrated in the name of poetry have occasioned this arraignment; yet it remains an extreme position. Extremes, however, are only half-truths. To see poetry's true nature, its true rôle, we need only examine it as it enters the Divine Plan.

TREASURY OF TRUTH

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that men at all times have chosen to express their highest thoughts and deepest aspirations in what we call poetry. A manner of speech that is akin to song, poetry borrows from music a measured, rhythmic movement and rises above the speech of every day through the mood of heightened imagination and quickened emotion which it breathes into words. Practically all early religious literature took poetic form. This was true of the beginnings of Greek literature, and, for the most part, of the still more

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Bks. II, III *passim*.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk. I, 983a. Ross, W. D. *The Student's Oxford Aristotle*. Oxford University Press (New York, 1942).

ancient literature of the Semitic races. In the designs of Providence, one of these Semitic peoples became the depository of Divine Revelation to mankind. This was, of course, the Hebrew people. Its inspired literature became the instrument whereby the knowledge of the One God of the Universe was preserved in the world until the moment came when God chose to reveal Himself in the Person of the Word made flesh.

When the great Revealer came at last, the sacred writings, which had kept alight that Truth in the darkness of the ages before His coming, had not yet fulfilled their destiny. They were not to be cast aside as having outlived their purpose. By a further dispensation of Divine Providence they were meant not only to prefigure Christ and herald His coming; they were meant for all time—for us who have seen the Great Light arise, no less than for the Jews of old who had waited so long in the dusk of promise and the type of prophecy. For these Sacred Writings were the treasury of Divine Truth which cannot change. In them was enshrined the heart of the true religion. Even now, then, they are of the utmost importance. Since these Sacred Writings, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are so often cast in the form of poetry, they are the most weighty argument for the nobility and value of poetry.

POETIC BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

Certainly the beginnings of Hebrew literature, the sources sometimes used by the sacred writers, were poetic in form. The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, composed by Moses himself, are, it is true written principally in prose. From the Hebrew literature antedating Moses, however, we can find within his books fragments of ancient poetry. The triumph song of Lamech³ and the Blessings of Jacob⁴ are examples of this. The canticles found in the last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, are pure poetry.⁵

As for the rest of the Old Testament, though the fact is obscured by the format of our present Bibles, it is evident that God, the Principal Author of Sacred Scripture, has chosen to convey a great portion of His Truth in the form of poetry. Besides the fragments just mentioned, the entire Book of Job, the Psalms, the Book of Proverbs, and the Canticle of Canticles are poetic. So too are sections

³ Gen. 4, 23-24.

⁴ Gen. 49, 2-27.

⁵ Deut. 32, 33.

of Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus, as well as the major part of the prophetic books.

The book which is poetic above all others is the Book of Psalms, a wonderful collection of the lyric poetry of ancient Israel, a treasure house of song, pure and lofty, sublime beyond all the poetry of the ancient world. The predominant characteristic of the Psalms is not investigation or speculation; it is prayer, intercourse with God, in all its phases. In the Psalms there sounds at times the deep note of sorrow, even of anguish. This minor key of sadness and melancholy is, however, just a background to the principal theme of lyrical joy.

An ancient writer says of the Psalms: "Study, then, this book. Are you sad? It weeps with you. Are you full of joy? You will find in it songs of rejoicing. Are you sinking under the burden of your sins? It will lend you words to express your sorrow and repentance. If your soul is in doubt, if you have felt the emptiness of all human things, it will hold up to your gaze the hope of heaven. If you have lost father, mother, children, . . . you will find in its pages accents befitting your grief. If your soul in the presence of God feels like barren ground . . . open this book; it will teach you how to pray."⁶

SAINT THOMAS AND THE POETRY IN SACRED SCRIPTURE

Even in translation the rich, sometimes even lavish imagery, the striking figures, the measured rhythm of poetry stand out in Sacred Scripture. That God is the Author is sufficient justification of the use of this manner of expression in the Bible. But, seeking to show us the infinite Wisdom of God in all things, Saint Thomas points out the reason God chose the poetic form. Since Divine Providence in its sweet but strong guidance of man moves him in accord with his nature, it is fitting that Holy Writ put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparison with material things. Since all man's knowledge begins in the senses, this comparison with material things, these images and metaphors, facilitate his understanding of more sublime truths. In thinking of God, the human mind requires sensible representations because of the sublimity of divinity. So it is that the poetry of Sacred Scripture, by its eminent use of these metaphors, leads men to the lofty summits of Divine Truth. To the obvious objection that such metaphors obscure the truth, St. Thomas argues that the light of Divine Revelation is not obscured by the sensible imagery in which it is veiled. For the piercing ray of Revelation,

⁶ Quoted by Dom Cabrol, O.S.B., *Liturgical Prayer, Its History and Spirit*. (New York, 1922), pp. 17-18.

retaining all its clarity, raises the minds of men to a perception of spiritual truth. Because God Revealing is also God Omnipotent, He elevates the minds of men, not permitting them to be enthralled by the mere sensible imagery that cloaks His Revelation.⁷

In the same vein, a modern author remarks: "The poet, then, has a way of communicating truth that no one else has; the poet can make us see things even about God that the theologian cannot say. It is the simple fact that St. Thomas gives us one particular kind of intimacy with truth in the *Adoro te Devote* that he does not give us in the *Summa Theologica* which supplements and gives new reality to what he teaches as a theologian."⁸ Thus it is that all the colorful pageantry of poetry, its striking expression, its imagery, are all intended to be expressions of the highest truths. The true poet writes not for the pleasant effect of his words, but for the portrayal of truth.

THE CHURCH AND THE USE OF POETRY

As a further defense of poetry, it need hardly be mentioned how extensively the Church employs it. Following the example of God, His Church seeks also to lead men to Him in a way natural to them. All through the ages with glorious, majestic sequences and hymns, she has sought to lead man to a penetration of the exalted mysteries of which she is the guardian. The daily Divine Office is overwhelmingly composed of poetry; the Psalms constitute the major portion of the Office, and every canonical hour is marked by its own hymn. The principal feasts of the year—Easter, Christmas, Pentecost and the others—all have their own "poems," the sequence of the Mass. Each has its peculiar beauty; all lead man to a closer glimpse of Divine Truth. St. Thomas was merely following the wisdom of his Mother, the Church, when he gave us the clearest expression of the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament in the noble poetry of his Eucharistic hymns, the *Pange Lingua*, the *Lauda Sion*, the *Verbum supernum* and the *Sacris Solemniis*.

CONCLUSION

What then of Plato's objection to poetry, and its modern counterpart? He seemed to identify poetry with that which is untrue, in-temperate, ephemeral, detrimental to youth. Must we conclude that all poetry is to be condemned merely from the fact that his description fit some of the early Greek poems? Evidently the answer is no.

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, P. I, q. 10, a. 1, corp. and ad 1.

⁸ Sheed, Frank J., *Poetry and Life* (New York, 1942), p. v.

The falsehood lies not in the poetry itself, but in the subjects of some poetry. A poem, for instance, concerning the pagan gods is necessarily untrue, since such gods are the product of man's imagination. Certainly these poems would be "attractive, but untrue." On the other hand, that poetry which treats of the One, True God becomes the most beautiful and sublime literature, for its beauty is not a mere panoply of vain images, but the abiding beauty of truth itself. In choosing to teach mankind about Himself through this medium, God, and His Church after Him, has manifested the value and nature of poetry.

This then is the reply to the scornful attitude towards poetry: "Poetry is not a department of prettiness; poetry is not a decoration. The Greeks called the poet a 'maker'; we call him a 'see-er.' No one calls him a decorator. He sees and he makes. His immediate concern is not the beauty of things, but the truth of things; beauty follows as the glow upon truth. . . . If anyone must go on saying that poetry means nothing to him, let him say it humbly. For he is claiming to be deaf."⁹

⁹ Sheed, *op. cit.* Preface, *passim*.

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