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ART, TRADITION, AND TRUTH

Both Nietzsche and Rilke have sometimes been criticized for their supposed inversion of "the tradition." Nietzsche in particular has been linked with Marx and Kierkegaard, and Marx has been cited again and again as having admitted that he wanted to stand Hegel on his head. Here one finds a welcome image for what is supposed to be wrong with all these men. As it happens, however, Marx has been misquoted, and the charge against all of these men should be dismissed. Alluding to one of Hegel's images, in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, Marx held that Hegel had stood man on his head (as if the spirit were basic), and Marx proposed to put man on his feet again. Similarly, Kierkegaard believed that the Church had turned Christianity upside down, and Nietzsche thought that Christianity had turned almost everything upside down, a proposition with which Rilke agreed at least in part. Each was opposed to some particular tradition and—this is especially true of Nietzsche and Rilke—also to any attempt to seek security in a tradition. But there is no such thing as "the" tradition, except in an inclusive sense in which Nietzsche and Rilke are part of it—the sense in which "the tradition" is the universe of discourse in which we place and try to understand them.

It may throw some light not only on Nietzsche and Rilke but on philosophy and poetry generally if we consider some specific criticisms and see, as we refute them, how the practice of these two men is really representative of great philosophers and poets generally. Above all we should be able in this way to illuminate the relation of art to tradition and truth.

Lest we set up a straw man, let us consider some strictures actually suggested by a critic—as it happens, the only one in the vast

literature on Nietzsche and on Rilke who has attempted any detailed comparison: Erich Heller, who has included an essay on "Rilke and Nietzsche, With a Discourse on Thought, Belief, and Poetry" in his book, *The Disinherited Mind*. On most points I agree with Heller, and I have learned from his essay. What I am interested in is not criticism of another critic but a better understanding of some really important problems which have rarely been posed so well. Some of Heller's brilliantly formulated criticisms shall here be used as points of departure.

"In the great poetry of the European tradition," Heller says, "the emotions do not interpret; they respond to the interpreted world. In Rilke's mature poetry the emotions do the interpreting and then respond to their own interpretation." At this point one is apt to think of Faulkner: often he does not first give us the interpreted course of events and then the emotional response of his characters, but he lets their emotions do the interpreting, and many readers find it very difficult to determine what has occurred. Heller continues: "All great art (and, for that matter, every human order stabilized by tradition) rests on a fundamentally fixed correspondence between the impact of external experience on man and man's articulate answers."

Is this an acceptable characterization of great art or, for that matter, great philosophy? To begin with the latter, some of the great philosophers have done a good deal of rationalizing, but that for which they are remembered is their refusal to accept the traditional order. We do not continue to read Descartes because his proofs of God's existence or the immortality of the soul command our respect, but because he resolved to doubt everything. We study Berkeley not because he was a bishop but because he questioned the existence of matter. It is not his traditional life but his radical skepticism that establishes Hume's claim to greatness. And Kant's stature is not a function of his postulates of God, freedom, and immortality, which few philosophers have taken seriously, but of his *Critique of Pure Reason* which sought to annihilate the very basis of traditional metaphysics and theology.

In this respect the great poets are at one with the great philosophers. Most of the famous names can be disregarded here because great poets who have written more than half a dozen fine poems

without real scope are exceedingly rare. The few that remain are described splendidly, if quite unintentionally, by Heller's strictures of Rilke: "Rilke, however is the poet of a world, the philosopher of which is Nietzsche. Its formations evade all traditional systems of cartography. Doubt has dislodged all certainties. The unnameable is christened and the unsayable uttered. It is a world in which the order of correspondences is violently disturbed. We can no longer be sure that we love the lovable and abhor the detestable. Good does no good and evil no harm."

This might as well have been written about Shakespeare, whose art it is to win our hearts for men from whom our judgment would recoil. Coriolanus may seem an extreme example. But what of Lear? Macbeth? Or even Hamlet? Does Hamlet's callous attitude after he has dispatched Polonius warrant the affection which almost every reader feels for him? Or is his calculated and unmerciful destruction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern so lovable? Or his behavior toward Ophelia? Or anything at all he does? Or is it not a fact that in Shakespeare's plays our emotions do *not* "respond to the interpreted world" but instead "do the interpreting and then respond to their own interpretation"?

No other English poet even approximates the scope of Shakespeare. But Milton and Blake who have at least tried to create worlds of their own are certainly no less open to Heller's objections than Rilke. "We can no longer be sure that we love the lovable and abhor the detestable." Is not this the very heart of *Paradise Lost*? Or *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*? Or Goethe's *Faust*? Or Dostoevsky's work?

The piety of the poet consists in a reverence not for tradition but for experience. The great poet is not a mellifluous liar but a man too honest to be able to accept what is stabilized and fixed. Impressed with the lack of correspondence between his own experience and the customary interpretations, he refuses to sacrifice his perception to the stereotyped idols of society. He is, like the great philosopher, a revolutionary. In Nietzsche's words: the creator breaks the old tablets. What Heller considers an objection is really nothing less than a criterion of great poetry: "the unnameable is christened and the unsayable uttered."

To be sure, there are differences of degree; also of emphasis.

Shakespeare's very success blinds us to his radical divergence from our customary valuations. Kant was content to bury some of the force of his radicalism in the obscurity of involved pedantry. And Plato offered some of his most revolutionary suggestions in the tone of urbane conversation. So, for that matter, did Hume. Not every philosopher challenges society to put him to death for subverting "the tradition" like Socrates.

The point is not that men like Nietzsche and Rilke were not so revolutionary after all. Rather, all great poetry and philosophy is deeply subversive—a fact appreciated by Plato and other advocates of censorship, but overlooked by the cultured Philistine who admires the great art of the past and condemns that of the present, without recapturing the experience behind either.

The common suggestion that Nietzsche or Rilke, or any number of others, fall outside "the tradition" or invert it is probably reducible to one of two positions: either we must reject, by the same token, all the great philosophers and poets, modern as well as Greek, or we are confronted with the truism that Nietzsche and Rilke are very different from Thomas and Dante. More likely than not, Thomas is viewed out of his historical context, and Dante's revolutionary innovations are disregarded. More important, Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake, Descartes, Hume, and Kant are all considered as so many stages of decline. This may be *one* way of seeing history; but the suggestion that Nietzsche and Rilke and other moderns stand apart as men who invert the European tradition is a sheer perversion of fact.

Consider just one of these supposed inversions to which Heller alludes: "Lovers seek separation, not union." He has in mind Rilke's only "Love Song":¹

*How could I keep my soul so that it might
not touch on yours? How could I elevate
it over you to reach to other things?
Oh, I would like to hide it out of sight*

1 All translations are my own. Those of Rilke appear here for the first time; those of Nietzsche are from *The Portable Nietzsche*, selected and translated, with an introduction, prefaces, and notes, by Walter Kaufmann (The Viking Press, New York 1954). With what Nietzsche and Rilke have in common I deal in another essay, in the *Kenyon Review*.

*with something lost in endless darkenings,
in some remote, still place, so desolate
it does not sing whenever your depth sings.
Yet all that touches us, myself and you,
takes us together like a violin bow
that draws a single voice out of two strings.
Upon what instrument have we been strung?
And who is playing with us in his hand?
Sweet is the song.*

This poem does not reflect either a deliberately contrived or a historically accomplished inversion of the world. What it does reveal is the honesty of a perception that was not blinded by traditional preconceptions, stereotypes, or clichés.

Do lovers always and only seek union? If the experience recorded in Rilke's poem is new, it is new in the same way in which the Impressionists' experience of light and shadow and color or Giotto's experience of perspective was new. In each case, convention impeded perception, and the achievement of the artist was a triumph of honesty.

Of course, lovers do not always seek separation, any more than love always makes us more lonely, or for that matter less lonely. There is a wealth of experiences that are not dreamt of in the poetry we have—no less, in fact, than are dreamt of only in poetry.

The experience which Rilke communicates depends on an extreme sensitivity to the feelings of others, or at least one other human being, and a penchant for analysis—traits which occur separately more often than together—and perhaps also a purpose in life beyond loving and being loved. Without exception, these were traits of Nietzsche too, and they help to explain his dictum, "my greatest dangers lie in pity." He himself comments on it in a letter (September 14, 1884): "This is the mistake which I seem to make eternally, that I imagine the sufferings of others as far greater than they really are."

Nietzsche's "revaluation" of pity was prompted in part by his honest perception of various experiences of pity, which for him was not a mere word but a cross. I do not mean to dissolve a philosophic position by deriving it from psychological accidents; on the contrary, any philosophic discussion of pity should be based on an understand-

ing of the experience of pitying and being pitied. Nor did Nietzsche here invert "the tradition." As he himself insisted, his critique of pity is in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Spinoza, La Rochefoucauld, and Kant. Surely, many of those who make much of tradition do not really know it well at all, and "the tradition" is, more often than not, an honorific name for the critic's own prejudices or, to be more polite, values. And belief in "the tradition" is so popular partly because it makes a virtue of security from deep and disturbing experiences.

Dante's *Vita Nuova* is sufficient testimony that he did not seek such security. We have few comparable records of self-exposure in both senses—meaning first of all, exposure to profound distraction. In this experience and in the act of creation in which it issues, the received order is always "violently disturbed" and "the unsayable uttered." In this respect, the work of Nietzsche and Rilke is at one with that of other great philosophers and poets, and they are closer to Dante than are the traditionalists. Tradition is what comes afterwards.

II

Let us return to Heller for another major criticism: "Neither Rilke nor Nietzsche praises the praiseworthy. They praise. They do not believe the believable. They believe. And it is their praising and believing itself that becomes praiseworthy and believable in the act of worship. Theirs is a *religio intransitiva*. Future anthropologists may see in it the distinctive religious achievement of modern Europe, the theological equivalent of *l'art pour l'art*."

This is a seductive interpretation, almost equally close to some Thomists and to Jaspers' reading of Nietzsche, but it is utterly unfair to both Nietzsche and Rilke. Their intense celebration of intensity may occasionally appear in this light, and the attitude Heller describes is certainly not entirely imaginary. In fact, this outlook has been given expression in one of the finest works of recent German prose, Hermann Hesse's *Klingsors letzter Sommer*, in which Klingsor says: "The sensuous is not worth one hair more than the spirit—as little as the other way around. It is all one, it is all equally good. Whether you embrace a woman or make a poem is the same. If

only the main thing is there, the love, the burning, being seized, then it makes no difference whether you are a monk on Mount Athos or an epicurean in Paris."

In their mature phase, both Nietzsche and Rilke refused to praise either the monk or the epicurean. Far from merely praising praise or believing in belief, both believed in, and praised, a particular kind of man and way of life. Both were inspired by their vision of "a new greatness of man." And in section 212 of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche argued that every great philosopher has been inspired by such a vision: He "has always found himself, and always had to find himself, in opposition to his today." The great philosophers have always been "the bad conscience of their time." Inspired by their vision of "a new greatness of man," they have applied "the knife vivisectionally to the very virtues of the time" and uncovered "how much hypocrisy" and "how many lies were concealed under the most honored type of their contemporary morality, how much virtue was outlived." Nietzsche's own profuse criticisms too were inspired by a positive conception: "Today the concept of 'greatness' entails being noble, wanting to be by oneself, being capable of being different, standing alone, and having to live independently." Or as he says toward the end of this passage: "Precisely this should be called greatness: to be capable of being as manifold as whole, as wide as full."

Clearly, Nietzsche is not praising indiscriminately for the sake of praising. One must empty his extremely concrete conceptions of their wealth of psychological detail before one can claim that they are hollow abstractions and not "believable." In the process of doing this—and Jaspers, for example, has done this in his two books on Nietzsche—one is bound to lose sight of the intimate connection, so accurately stressed by Nietzsche himself, between his positive conceptions and his trenchant criticisms of modern man. That his strictures are misunderstood when they are divorced from the vision that inspires them, that is the theme of the chapter "On Passing By" in which Zarathustra distinguishes himself from his ape by insisting: "Out of love alone shall my despising and my warning bird fly up, not out of the swamp." Zarathustra's comment on "The Despisers of the Body" is no less applicable to Nietzsche and the philosophers whom he admires: "It is their respect that begets their contempt."

The man whom Nietzsche praises is neither an epicurean nor a monk, however burning and however seized, but he combines sensuousness and spirituality, profound feeling and a penetrating intellect. He is the man of reflective passion and passionate reflection. All of Nietzsche's heroes, from Heraclitus and Socrates to Caesar, Leonardo, and Goethe are models and anticipations of such a type, "as manifold as whole, as wide as full."

What Rilke has in common with Nietzsche is not praise for the sake of praising, but rather that he praised the same kind of life and, again like Nietzsche, praised it not merely implicitly but with all his power and consciousness. And it is this that distinguishes Nietzsche and Rilke from most philosophers and poets of the past. Moreover, it is from Nietzsche above all others that one learns to ask about every philosophy and every religion, and about great poets and artists too: what is it that they praise?

Once we ask this question, we cannot fail to see how much closer Nietzsche is to Plato, Aristotle, and Shakespeare than are most of the defenders of "the tradition," let alone those who believe in the trinity of Christianity, science, and democracy. One invokes the awesome name of Aristotle but ignores his striking portrait of the great-souled man. One cannot but admit Shakespeare's greatness but does not ask what kind of man and life he praised; one ignores, or tries to explain away, his 94th sonnet instead of comparing it with his plays or such lines as these from *Measure for Measure*:

O, it is excellent

*To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.*

Surely, this is Nietzsche in a nutshell. Consider Zarathustra's discourse "On Those Who Are Sublime": "There is nobody from whom I want beauty as much as from you who are powerful: let your kindness be your final self-conquest. Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you. Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws." But when Nietzsche himself sums up in six words what he praises, "the Roman Caesar with Christ's soul" (*The Will to Power*, section 983), Jaspers mistakes this crowning image for a mere juggling of hollow concepts, "without any power of vision and un-

realizable" (*Nietzsche und das Christentum*). In fact, Nietzsche's praise is neither intransitive nor does it invert "the tradition"; rather, the man he envisages invites comparison with the visions of Plato, Aristotle, and Shakespeare.

III

The one major charge that is still lacking in this orthodox indictment of Nietzsche and Rilke is their abandonment of something that is usually called, rather vaguely, "realism." Heller does not require this cliché and spells out the charge in some detail. For Nietzsche and Rilke, he says, "the separation between art and reality appears to be complete. Reality is the death of the spirit and art its salvation. Where does truth reside? Is it in the deadly real world or in the saving vision of the artist? The question lingers on the all but imperceptible border-line between delusion and lunacy, between Nietzsche's madness and Rilke's prophetic pose, tenaciously maintained even beyond the confines of poetic inspiration. Nietzsche, believing that truth was insufferable and that poetry was an illusion, continually suspected that at least some of his thought was merely poetry. Rilke, on the other hand, succeeded most of the time in convincing himself that the thought behind his poetry was the mind of truth."

Rilke's facile belief that his elegies and sonnets were gifts of inscrutable inspiration undoubtedly reflects a lack of strength and a sense of his own inability to effect any improvements. There are lines in the elegies which appear to be the mere padding of pathos, and many passages in the sonnets make little sense. Again and again the mood and the verve must sustain the lines, and the lines fail to sustain the mood. Here the poet's appeal to inspiration cannot hide the failure of inspiration. Rilke's elegies sometimes share the fault of Whitman's long poems, though Rilke's obscurity makes it harder to find him out. Most of the sonnets too are marred by a lack of sufficient insight or perception to fill fourteen lines. But the same is surely true of Shakespeare's sonnets, and even some of Shakespeare's best achieve excellence only in the opening lines and end rather lamely. The above mentioned 94th sonnet is one of the most notable exceptions. Many weaknesses of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* are explained

by his boast that the first twenty-six sonnets were written between the 2nd and the 5th of February, 1922, and that he never altered a word. We recall Ben Jonson's retort to those who praised Shakespeare for never blotting a line: wish he had blotted a thousand! While some of Rilke's commentators have been too worshipful, and obscurity, though not necessarily a fault, is no proof of profundity either, all this does not set Rilke apart or prove him a minor poet. The fact remains that few poets of any age have written as many superb poems as Rilke.

To come to Nietzsche. When he contrasted truth and beauty, he had in mind a particular conception of beauty: a prettification of reality. He opposed those who argued that something must be true because it would be beautiful if it were, or that something could not be true because it was not at all pretty. Like everything admitted about Rilke, this is very far indeed from supporting any complete "separation between art and reality." So is Nietzsche's fear in "The Song of Melancholy" in *Zarathustra* that he might be "only poet." As he says in the same poem, he means that he might be "only speaking colorfully . . . climbing around on mendacious word bridges." Although he considered *Zarathustra* the gift of inspiration, as he tells us in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche did not stop writing afterwards and consider his life sufficiently justified, as Rilke did more or less after having completed his elegies and sonnets. In spite of his exceedingly poor health, Nietzsche sought further clarity in half a dozen further books in which he is clearly not "only speaking colorfully."

Here is some basis for contrasting Nietzsche and Rilke. In section 146 of *Human, All-too-Human*, Nietzsche says: "Regarding truths, the artist has a weaker morality than the thinker." But Rilke's lack of perfect sincerity goes beyond any necessity of his art; and the "prophetic pose" which disturbs Heller in some of the letters also mars some of the elegies and sonnets. This lack of ultimate honesty with himself is one reason for ranking Rilke below Nietzsche in overall stature. Besides, Nietzsche's scope far exceeds Rilke's. But the question of the separation of art and reality cannot be settled in these terms: it raises a much more general issue.

The dualism of art and reality has been denied by almost all artists. If "reality" is monopolized by convention and mediocrity and

all intense experience and keen perception are banished from it, then of course the artist is cut off from it. But one can surely question the preconceptions in which men hide from the risks of powerful experience. Nietzsche and Rilke did not exalt prettification above sordid reality; they rejected bloodless stereotypes for a vision of magnificent terror.

Consider such diverse painters as Rembrandt, Rubens, and Van Gogh. Rembrandt did not shut his eyes to reality to escape into a realm of agreeable fancy: he saw the aged, the beggars, and the outcasts of society as they had not been seen before. He penetrated all kinds of traditional prejudices to see the beauty of reality. Well might a contemporary have objected, as Heller does to Rilke and Nietzsche: "We can no longer be sure that we love the lovable and abhor the detestable." Precisely this revaluation is a measure of Rembrandt's greatness.

A critic brought up on the values of Raphael, Giorgione, or even Titian, might have voiced Heller's protest when confronted with Rubens' nudes. But Rubens did not escape from reality into art: he saw beauty where previous painters had failed to see it; he was in Nietzsche's sense a Dionysian artist. And so of course was Van Gogh. His world may be a realm of madness; his flowers, cypresses, and starry skies do not look like snapshots. But he did not fly into fancy; he did not retreat from a tragic world to find refuge among comfortable creatures of the mind. Rather he seems to be saying: even in madness there is beauty, even in fever and torment there is glory, even in despair there is power.

In the end all three criticisms of Nietzsche and Rilke come down to this: they were different from St. Thomas; they did not praise what St. Thomas praised or believe what he believed; and their conception of reality was not his. The norm of course need not be St. Thomas, though it often is he even when he is not named; the norm could be merely the anonymous "one"—what Heidegger calls *Das Man*. What matters is that the critic thinks he knows what is praiseworthy and what is real, instead of considering the possibility that men like Nietzsche and Rilke, Plato and Shakespeare, Rembrandt and Rubens can teach us something about these matters by changing our perception.

IV

The fashionable attempt to understand great thinkers or artists in terms of their historical situation leads to as much misunderstanding as understanding. Neither shortcomings nor tragedy should be blamed on "the time." One should first consider whether other ages—and here one should not think solely of the Middle Ages of which, moreover, one usually does not know too much—were entirely different. Nor should one rush into psychological explanations without asking whether writers of a different psychological constitution fare very differently. Nietzsche's and Rilke's profound solitude, broken only briefly by the philosopher's friendship with Wagner and the poet's with Rodin, and the encounter of both, fifteen years apart, with Lou Salomé, seems to have affected their work and invites psychological and historical explanations. I shall give the merest suggestion of each kind of approach.

In personal life both men were exceedingly shy and retiring. Their passion was set free only when they wrote. The world has gained because they poured all their feelings into their books; but the histrionics which others vent casually on their friends have here become part of the work. Solitude, while greatly increasing the intensity of feeling, diminishes the powers of self-criticism.

Or: it was the age that condemned these men to utter loneliness. And that very lack of ordinary communication which keeps the writer's experience undefiled by common preconceptions also makes for a lack of disciplined scrutiny. We find the same faults in the last two great books of James Joyce and already in the Second Part of *Faust* which Goethe kept secret until his death. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the artist loses contact with his audience and as a result becomes undisciplined. By way of contrast, Aeschylus and Sophocles contended against each other before an interested public which they were educating in the process. Nietzsche and Rilke stood alone without rivals or audience, and what little adulation each received only made matters worse.

Such explanations do not go deep enough. Shakespeare had an audience and wrote with the immediate aim of having his plays performed, and there was no lack of rivals except insofar as his greatness precludes our giving them that name. Yet what striking lack of

disciplined scrutiny! And what incredible histrionics have here become part of the work! The same is true of Plato's dialogues. Rilke is vastly different from Shakespeare, and Nietzsche from Plato; yet they all face the same problem. It is rooted in the poetic impulse which is as eager to express as it is reluctant to exclude. Most philosophers do not know this plight; but that is because, unlike Plato and Nietzsche, they are no poets.

V

The relation of great poetry to "the time" and to truth deserves further reflection. Comparing Shakespeare with Dante, T. S. Eliot says: "It is *equally* great poetry, though the philosophy behind it is not great." Eliot is another critic who knows what is real and praiseworthy and true, without the benefit of any reading of Shakespeare. As if Shakespeare might not affect one's notions of great philosophy. In this instance, however, Shakespeare receives a dispensation: "it was his business to express the greatest emotional intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think." It is one of the central themes of Eliot's essay on "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," which we have quoted, that critics should not read themselves into Shakespeare; but surely Eliot is thinking of himself when he suggests that the shortcomings of the poet must be blamed on his time. As if "his time" thought anything in particular. Shakespeare's, like ours, abounded in ideas.

Nevertheless I agree that the truth of beliefs is not relevant to the greatness of poetry. Once more I shall use Heller as a foil. He argues that Rilke's poetry expresses beliefs, that these beliefs happen to be false (as Eliot would say: "the philosophy behind it is not great"), and that (as Eliot would not say) Rilke's poetry is worse for that. Rilke expressed Nietzsche's philosophy in verse, and this may well have been as great a philosophy as "his time" offered him; but if Rilke's beliefs had been Christian—this standard is suggested throughout Heller's book—his poetry would be that much better.

The argument that to Heller's mind "finally proves" the relevance of the truth of beliefs to the greatness of poetry is this: "There are ideas and beliefs so prosaic, outlandish or perverse in their innermost structure that no great or good poetry can come from them;

for instance Hitler's racialism. . . . If there were no relation, there would be no reason either why the most perverse or idiotic beliefs should not be convertible into *great* poetry. They are not." That some ideas are too prosaic is of course quite irrelevant. Probably no great or good poetry will ever give an exposition of Goedel's theorem, but not because it is untrue. And as for Hitler's racialism, Germany did not produce any great poetry at all under Hitler's regime; and the reasons are obvious. Moreover, biological, or pseudo-biological, theories rarely form the subject matter of great serious poetry.

Perhaps dramatic poetry is the genre in which beliefs are most frequently expressed. Does it bear out Heller's view? On the contrary: the great tragic poets excel precisely at presenting attitudes which one would generally consider "outlandish or perverse" with such poetic power that we experience them from the inside. And in epic poetry, the attitudes of Homer's heroes, or the poet's for that matter, are scarcely closer to Christianity than Rilke's elegies. Great poetry does not fit moralistic preconceptions. It was because he recognized this that Plato proposed to expurgate Homer and expel the dramatic poets from his ideal city.

We should ask not only Heller but also Eliot whether there is any major work of great and good poetry that does not abound in "outlandish or perverse" ideas, whether even one such work is "Christian" in the somewhat laudatory sense which determines contemporary English usage. Dante reached the heights of his poetic power in his *Inferno*, and his beliefs about hell might well strike modern readers as "outlandish or perverse." And the hero of the greatest Protestant epic is Satan.

The traditionalist critics take for granted that we know the truth of beliefs quite independently of poetry, and that the greatness of a *philosopher* is unquestionably determined by the truth of his beliefs. Both these assumptions are false. If the question were raised whether J. S. Mill was a greater philosopher than Plato, would the issue depend on how many beliefs of each were true and how many false? The traditionalists do not understand the function of beliefs either in philosophy or in poetry.

VI

The most concise and suggestive formulation of the function of beliefs in poetry is T. S. Eliot's: "The poet who 'thinks' is merely the poet who can express the emotional equivalent of thought. But he is not necessarily interested in the thought itself." I think this is very wrong.

Consider one of Rilke's poems (*Neue Gedichte*, Part Two):

ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO

*We did not know his high, unheard of head
where his eyes' apples ripened. Yet his torso has
retained their glowing as
a candelabrum where his vision, not yet dead,*

*only turned low, still shines. For else the breast
could not blind you, nor could we still discern
the smile that wanders in the loins' faint turn
to that core which once carried manhood's crest.*

*Else would this stone, disfigured and too small,
stand mute under the shoulders' lucid fall
and not gleam like a great cat's skin, and not*

*burst out of all its contours, bright
as a great star: there is no spot
that does not see you. You must change your life.*

Surely, Rilke did not have a thought before he looked for a suitable emotional equivalent, found a torso, and decided that this might do. What he records is his experience of the statue—an experience in which various perceptions, thoughts, and emotions interpenetrate, as they do in the poem. The poem expresses several thoughts, not merely their emotional equivalents. It presents the thoughts themselves in their emotional context, as parts of an experience.

The thought apart from any experience, torn out of its living context and examined under the intellectual microscope like a piece of dead tissue, does not concern the poet, *qua* poet. It may interest him insofar as he is also philosophically inclined. So far, Eliot is right;

but I should not call the piece of dead tissue "the thought itself."

Eliot's notion of thinking is altogether inadequate: "In truth neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking—that was not their job." Whatever "real" thinking may be, it certainly is no job. Shakespeare did not really think because there is no evidence "that he thought to any purpose; that he had any coherent view of life, or that he recommended any procedure to follow." These are very strange criteria of thinking, at variance not only with our ordinary use of the term but also with the practice of many outstanding philosophers. When Eliot denies that Shakespeare thought, but then speaks of "whatever his time happened to think," he comes close to implying that there are really only two kinds of thinking: the "good" thinking accepted by Dante, and the "bad" thinking of the times in which poets less fortunate than Dante are condemned to live and write.

The separation of thought from experience, however, which Eliot makes the criterion of "real" thinking, has its dark side. Religious beliefs, for example, though originally prompted by some experience, often become an acceptable substitute for religious experience or prevent the believer from savoring the full range of his own inimitable experience. The thought that "you must change your life" is a relatively common thought, present not only in Rilke's time but in all ages. What distinguishes the poet is not that he found a striking emotional equivalent for it, but that he did not let the thought get in the way of the experience; and what Rilke has in common with Nietzsche is not beliefs as much as experiences—and the determination to let no belief dehydrate them.

The dichotomy of thought and emotion on which Eliot depends is quite modern and particularly characteristic, *pace* Eliot, of logical positivism, especially in its first and crudest phase. It was largely alien to Greek philosophy. Plato juxtaposed reason and the senses without confining emotion to either realm: he knew the passion of thinking too well. Among the earliest pre-Socratics there is no evidence of any division of man into disjointed faculties; and this is one main reason why Heidegger rejects the whole Western tradition that begins with Plato, why he goes back to the pre-Socratics, and why he has occupied himself so largely with Hölderlin and Rilke, saying that his own philosophy is really an explication of Rilke. He

seeks a mode of perception that leaves behind the disunity of modern man. And Rilke, like Nietzsche, is an outstanding representative of a non-positivistic sensibility in which thought and emotion interpenetrate.

In sum: I cannot agree that the philosopher is interested "in the thought itself" while the poet is not. Many philosophers are altogether too exclusively concerned with the relation of a thought to other thoughts, and too little with the thought itself. They are interested in its consistency with other ideas and in the adequacy of arguments in which it appears either as a link or as a conclusion; but they are "not necessarily interested in the thought itself"—often much less so than the poet. Most men, including many philosophers, discuss the truth of beliefs without any clear notion of their meaning—of their many possible meanings. What the poet, however, is supremely interested in and can teach the philosopher is the meaning of thoughts; and where this is ignored, any discussion of truth is likely to degenerate into the most arid scholasticism. The relation between philosopher and poet is not a one-way affair, and least of all does the poet give polished expression to the ideas of the philosopher.

VII

What does the great poet do? I have rejected the traditionalists' account of the relation of poetry to tradition, reality, and truth: they fail to recognize the essential autonomy of poetry which subverts stereotypes hallowed by tradition, changes our perception of reality, and makes accepted truths questionable by making us aware of the concrete meanings of ideas.

The poet does not imitate reality. This Greek conception, which was originally suggested by epic and dramatic poetry, does not do justice to Homer and Sophocles any more than to Shakespeare. The great poet is the enemy of our everyday reality: he makes that which we have seen with our own eyes appear as a mere shadow of that reality which we encounter in *Oedipus* or *Lear*, *Prometheus* or *The Brothers Karamazov*. He shows us that we live on the surface and are all but blind, and says in Rilke's words: "you must change your life."

In drama and epic, novel and lyrical poem, the poet records

individual experiences in their unmitigated subjectivity and thus expands our subjectivity and cracks our horizons. The poet is not bound by any man's thoughts; he records experience with its emotionally colored thoughts and his thoughts about emotions. He neither imitates an archaic torso of Apollo nor sets down in rhyme thoughts about it which someone else has had before him. He gives us the experience of a man who is unusually sensitive and thoughtful.

Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is admittedly quite different from a clinical recording of a stream of consciousness. But how can one communicate an emotion, or for that matter any experience, seeing that emotion has part in all of them? General labels like "admire" or "beautiful" or "love" conceal a multitude of thoughts, sensations, and perceptions, if they do not altogether supplant the dazzling texture of experience. A phrase like "shoulders' lucid fall" is not the emotional equivalent of a thought—what thought?—but the thoughtful equivalent of an emotion.

In the child's consciousness, thought and emotion are not yet dissociated, and many words that later lose their color have a powerful emotional impact. Gradually we learn to some extent to disentangle thoughts from emotions, not only in mathematics and science generally but whenever we are asked to tell simply and briefly "what happened." Eventually, the emotions shrivel until they become weak enough to be confined by a small vocabulary and content merely to accompany that which really matters. The great artist liberates the emotions and recreates the sheer wonder of childhood without surrendering the development of the intellect.

Like a child, the great artist is less confined by convention than most adults: he experiences things in a profoundly individual manner, more intensely and honestly, less swayed by reputations and authorities. Aware of this, Nietzsche and Rilke occasionally made the child the symbol of the creator, but neither shared the anti-intellectualism of some of the romantics or wanted to return to childhood or "nature." Nietzsche in particular recognized that the greatest artists were men of surpassing intellectual power, men like Leonardo and Michelangelo, Dante and Goethe; and he wanted the same freedom for the intellect as for the emotions. Neither he nor Rilke would consider following the precedent of some of the romantics by fleeing back into the arms of authority.

Feeling the impact of Rodin and Cézanne—he wrote on both—Rilke thought at times that it was the poet's task

*just to say: house,
bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window—
at most: column, tower—but to say it, understand,
oh, to say it as the things themselves never
thought of existing intensely.*

Seeing how a painter can take a jug or an apple and restore to it the intensity which it had lost in ordinary adult perception; seeing how a sculptor can take the apparently unmysterious shape of a human body and show us passion, longing, despair, grace, agony, and beauty, Rilke thought that the poet might take the everyday words and restore their poetry to them.

One can re-experience this thought and understand it; but if we examine it instead of abandoning ourselves to the rhythms of Rilke's ninth elegy, we find that this aestheticism borders on the absurd: "Are we perhaps *here* just to say: house"? Rilke himself might have admitted that we are here for no purpose at all, but can give our life a purpose; and "just to say: house" is an absurd purpose.

The poet is not condemned merely to revitalize words; and any mystery that one can ultimately find in the words, "house, bridge, well" is a paltry and bloodless thing compared to Rodin's *Tête de la douleur* or *La Martyre*—the mute hopelessness that the sculptor has forced to utter not merely a blessing (like Balaam who had intended to pronounce a curse) but the comfort of complete achievement.

The great poet revitalizes words only incidentally. To brook comparison with Rodin he must achieve with words what Rodin does in bronze or marble. He does not imitate reality but realizes that our everyday world is not so much a brute reality as a human creation no longer recognized as such; an artifact that has fallen into the hands of uncomprehending apes; something that is all skin and void of blood because the mass of men have lost the perception of those more poetic, more creative, more childlike men who originally fashioned words and values as a mirror of the mysteries they felt. But the poet does not restore the life that was there in the beginning, in childhood or in the childhood of the race: he creates new

life, more than life—that for which human life is a reach and aspiration.

John Stuart Mill once defined matter as “the permanent possibility of sensation.” For Rilke reality is a call to perceive—but to perceive as has never been perceived before—and to transform, to create our own world which is essentially new. The world is the raw material of the creator. It is not what a divine creator has in the beginning wrought out of chaos; we are still confronted by the chaos out of which we must create a world.

Not only the traditionalists have shrunk from this prospect. Plato did too. He thought that what passes in time is merely an imperfect explication of what is eternal. Time, he said, is the moving image of eternity. Such otherworldliness slights the power of man. Art is the eternal image of the moving. The flux is sound and fury signifying nothing, but human art has fashioned works of such perfection that men have thought the world must be a copy of what are in fact human creations. For man’s deepest superstition demands that excellence must have priority in time too. Nothing has ever prevailed against it in the popular mind except the more recent superstition that excellence must always appear late. But excellence, like ecstasy, is always possible. And it is a fallacy to mistake our oblivion of time for an experience of something transcendent and eternal. In truth, it is only in some works of art that ecstasy endures.