

“The reason... why the philosopher may be likened to the poet is this: both are concerned with the marvellous” (Thomas Aquinas): Terror and hope: the reaction of philosophy and poetry in front of wonder.

In a society, like ours, that struggles to achieve happiness through the march of progress and whose philosophy uniquely stands in supporting scientific research, hearing St Thomas Aquinas’ statement about the close connection between philosophy and poetry, certainly strikes us. For it reminds us about the fundamental concerns of these two subjects: the sense of wonder that arises inside man as soon as he faces something marvelous. Actually, this instinctive marveling is the very starting point for the development of western civilisation, which finds its own roots within the great achievements obtained by the ancient Greeks. In fact, the pursuit of wisdom generated by wonder gave to the Greeks the opportunity to exploit their genius, both through poetry and philosophy, paving the way for the creation of the great masterpieces of western culture.

Nevertheless, in order to fully understand what Aquinas really meant through his statement, we need to define what marvelous is. Clearly we could define “marvelous” as something that is able to arise a sense of incredible wonder inside man: each man in front of real beauty perceives a sense of awe and this is easily recognisable in everyday life. Yet, as the Greeks defined what was marvelous with the adjective *δεινός*, which stands both for what is extremely wonderful and what is terribly fearful, we could say that wonder can be generated also through terrible facts, such as death, pain and sorrow. Hence, marvelous is the entirety of existence, the fact that things are and happen that generate extraordinary effects. Consequently, man is instinctively moved to marvel and reflect in front of reality, since, as Aquinas says in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, “perplexity and wonder arise from ignorance. For when we see certain obvious effects whose cause we do not know, we wonder about their cause”¹. For this reason at the very origin of the western culture stands wonder, which, in the meeting with man’s reason, starts moving him instinctively towards reflection and pursuit of wisdom, and hence philosophy.

Yet, quoting Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons”² and since “Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry [...] are all in their general conception modes of imitation”³, as children the ancient Greek poets

¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, edited by JOSEPH KENNY, translated by JOHN P. ROWAN, Chicago, 1961, p.22, paragraph 55.

² ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, edited by S.H. BUTCHER, London, Macmillan and Co., 1898, p.15.

³ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, p.7.

started comprehending their *first lessons* imitating, and therefore reflecting, facts and stories (which we'd better call myths) passed on to them, giving birth to poetry. Hesiod and his *Theogony* clearly demonstrate this need to set up an order, both metaphysical and moral. Collecting myths and narrating the origin of the world and how the gods came to be in contact with man, the poet tried to investigate the concept of κόσμος, which doesn't just stand for the universe regarded as an astronomical concept, but also for the order on which reality is based. The same happened with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, masterpieces which are actual attempts to collect myths into a unique story, aiming to show how glorious man can be and his relationship with the gods and fate. Actually, Homer's characters struggling for eternal glory and knowledge are clear examples of the movement generated into man as he marvels at his own condition in life. In *Iliad's* sixth book, for instance, Homer describes the Achaean Diomedes approaching the fight against the Trojan Glaukos. They both are glorious soldiers, ready to prove their value on the field, but as soon as they run into each other, Diomedes asks his enemy his ancestry and Glaukos surprisingly answers:

Great-hearted Tydeides, why enquirest thou of my generation? Even as are the generations of leaves such are those likewise of men; the leaves that be the wind scattereth on the earth, and the forest buddeth and putteth forth more again, when the season of spring is at hand; so of the generations of men one putteth forth and another ceaseth.⁴

This unexpected answer surely gives us a hint of the dramatic feeling the Greeks should have had in front of the mystery of existence and the questions arisen as soon as they faced the decay of life into death. Hence, the wonder arisen in those heroes certainly made them move in order to achieve something that could prevent them from being totally ephemeral: glory and the concept of fate. What Homer did was to take these stories in order to pursue wisdom and help people to achieve it.

According to this, the role of poetry within ancient Greece gains a social value: the poet imitates and describes reality in front of an audience and, as time went on, the account of myths evolved into Tragedy. Through tragedies, poetry exploits its educational purpose. Their power conveys the impulse of the poet to share the knowledge he has gained with his audience. In fact the purpose of tragedy, as Aristotle says, is to imitate a noble existence (as epic poetry did) through action in order to generate, through pity and fear, what the Greeks called κάθαρσις, which stands for purification. How can the tragedy purify? The subject matter of tragedies, according to Aristotle, are stories of noble men that decay from fortune to misfortune because of an error. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* the glorious main character, coming back home as a hero after a ten year battle against Troy, sees his fortune turned upside-down due to the lust and revenge of his wife upon him. Ten years earlier, in fact, looking for glory and honour Agamemnon had decided to satisfy the gods by killing his daughter, but his decision turned against him and in consequence he was killed by his

⁴ HOMER, *Iliad*, edited and translated by T. A. BUCKLEY, London, Bell and Daldy, 1873, book VI.

wife. In front of these tremendous acts the poet needs to set an order, to look for a meaning and a good plan created by the gods, in order to justify this sorrow, as it appears clearly in *Agamemnon's* paradox:

So be it! Yet, what is good? And who
 Is God? How name him, and speak true?
 If he accept the name that men
 Give him, Zeus I name him then.
 I, still perplexed in mind,
 For long have searched and weighed
 Every hope of comfort or of aid:
 Still I can find
 No creed to lift this heaviness,
 This fear that haunts without excuse.
 No name inviting faith, no wistful guess,
 Save only Zeus.

.....
 Zeus, whose will has marked for man
 The sole way where wisdom lies;
 Ordered one eternal plan:
 Man must suffer to be wise.
 Head-winds heavy with past ill
 Stray his course and cloud his heart:
 Sorrow takes the blind soul's part-
 Man grows wise against his will.⁵

As we can see, Aeschylus believed that sorrow had a meaning, that reality was ordered to a purpose decided by a mysterious deity, unknowable but existing. Moreover, this order or cosmos supports man's pursuit of wisdom even against his will. As a result of this fearful representation, the audience would have been able to empathise with the main character's decay and reflect on their own existence. Therefore, taking on stage something marvelous, spectators could be purified through fear and pity and start reflecting again about human existence and fate.

Thomas Aquinas states in his commentary that "the myths with which the poets deal are composed of wonders, and the philosophers themselves were moved to philosophize as a result of wonder"⁶ therefore, from the same instinctive poetical necessity to discover the marvel of reality, philosophy blossoms and starts seeking its own path for wisdom's sake. Through the ages though, the path followed by philosophers, which is rational and systematic, seemed to get always further and further from the one followed by the poets. This distance has probably been created by the philosopher's

⁵ AESCHYLUS, *Agamemnon*, translated by P. VELLACOTT, p. 4-5.

⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, p. 22, paragraph 55.

necessity to base his research on observation and experience. In fact, since the existence of gods didn't actually explain reality in its complete depth, philosophers started to pave their theories upon what seemed logical and provable.

Moreover, as T. S. Eliot says, the purpose of the philosopher is trying to deal with the ideas in themselves, whereas the poet struggles to realise ideas through imitations and hence images.⁷ Therefore, although the original marveling was shared both by the philosophers and the poets, philosophical research probably led the latter to betray their mythical tradition in order to examine the questions arising through poetry. Aiming to pursue wisdom and to explain the meaning of existence, knowledge had to be ordered in a system and to satisfy the never ending questions of human reason about reality and its effects. The famous Socratic expression, "I know that I know nothing"⁸, clearly witnesses the philosopher's desire to continuously deepen and improve his wisdom in a more specific way and keep on discovering, step by step, the origin of κόσμος.

Nonetheless, these two subjects, as Aquinas thought, are still closely linked, because of this common concern with wonder. Both have been essential for the development of western society and, as a matter of fact, there perhaps wouldn't have been philosophy if poetry hadn't underlined and awakened those critical questions generated by marvel. On the other hand, quoting Eliot, "poetry can be in some sense philosophic. The poet can deal with philosophic ideas, not as matter for argument, but as matter for inspection"⁹ and, hereinafter, "the aim of the poet is to state a vision, and no vision of life can be complete which does not include the articulate formulation of life which human minds make"¹⁰. In fact, the way the poet perceives the meaning of reality is stated as soon as he puts his characters into action. Even if the writer believed that the world is ruled by chaos and life is pointless, he would be stating his own sceptical philosophy.

One good example can be found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In order to create a work both reasonable and plausible, Dante relied on Aquinas and Aristotle's cosmogony and ethics. During his journey the poet states a vision of the world which is disclosed, little by little, as the story proceeds. As a matter of fact, as Eliot says, "the philosophy is an ingredient, it is a part of Dante's world just as it is a part of life"¹¹; therefore Dante, even with his amazing poetical skills, necessarily needed to base his master-

⁷ T.S. ELIOT, *The Sacred Wood, essays on poetry and criticism*, London, Methuen & Co., 1920, p. 147.

⁸ PLATO, *Apology*, edited by BENJAMIN JOWETT, 1999.

⁹ T.S. ELIOT, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 147.

¹⁰ T.S. ELIOT, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 154.

¹¹ T.S. ELIOT, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 147.

piece on a solid philosophy. “Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory [...] or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something perceived”¹² succeeding in making wisdom reachable for all his readers.

Consequently, we have seen how in the meeting between man’s reason and reality, man is moved to pursue an order both through poetry - especially epic poetry and tragedy - and philosophy, apparently following different paths but influencing each other constantly. Dante’s masterpiece demonstrates the tight connection between these two subjects, which, completing each other in their reaction to wonder, have been perfecting their educational vocation for centuries, pushing humanity towards the pursuit of wisdom and fulfilment.

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¹² T.S. ELIOT, *The Sacred Wood*, p.155.