Ladislas Tatarkiewicz

TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF POETICS

Who is not familiar with Aristotle's *Poetics?* Who is not familiar with modern poetics, if only Boileau's *Art poétique?* But apart from specialists, who is familiar with the poetics of the entire period between classical antiquity and modern times, between Aristotle and the Pléiade or Boileau? Yet, this period extended over two thousand years. Furthermore, it possessed its own poetics, governed by the strictest principles, worked out to the last detail. It may be divided into two great epochs: the end of Hellenic-Roman antiquity, on the one hand, and the entire Middle Ages, on the other. The poetics of these two epochs were very similar, since the second depended in great part on the first. Nevertheless, they present differences which oblige us to study them separately.

I

The ancient system of poetics was crystallized rather rapidly after Aristotle, in the 3rd century B.C. This crystallization was the achievement of Theophrastus and especially of Neoptolemus. Their writings concerning poetics have not been preserved; at the most,

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traces of them may be found in subsequent authors. Nor has the work of Poseidonius, a Stoic of the first century A. D., constituting an important step in the history of poetics, been handed down to us. On the other hand, we do have dissertations concerning the poetics of Dionysius of Halicarnassus as well as of Demetrius, both of whom lived in the first century B. C., as well as an anonymous work, later than these, *On the Sublime*, in Greek, and Horace's *Ars poetica* in Latin, dating from the first century A. D. These latter two works alone—*On the Sublime* and the *Ars poetica*—became very famous in subsequent centuries and are even better known today. Besides, the treatise of the Epicurean, Philodemus of Gadara, *On Poetic Works* (first century of our epoch) has reached us in fragments, preserved on scrolls of Herculaneum.

All these works, even if they probably account for only a very small part of what was written on poetics in ancient times, do transmit to us, nevertheless, a precise picture, especially if one bears in mind the supplementary materials found in the Rhetorics of Cicero, Quintilian, or Hermogenes, and in the philosophical treatises by Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre, Sextus Empiricus, the discourses of Dion of Prusa, and Lucian's essays.

THE PROBLEM OF POETICS

Problems of poetics were most often expounded according to the same schema. This was borrowed from Neoptolemus who divides his course in poetics in three parts: the first dealing with *poetry*, the second with the *poem*, the third with the *poet*. In other words, the first part dealt with poetry in general, the second with its different *genres*, the third with its peculiarities growing out of the poet's personality. Philologists claim to find this schema even in so apparently free a composition as Horace's *Ars poetica.*

Just as in classical Greece, interest was almost exclusively shown only in rhymed poetry, so in the Hellenistic period, literary prose acquired practically equal rights. Besides, the difference between these two *genres* was not sharply apparent; even in a classical epoch, Gorgias defined poetry as metrical language, while Aristotle defined it as imitative language. In other words, one defined it by its form, the other by its content.

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The two points of view, that of form and that of content, were reconciled by Poseidonius' definition. This recognizes that poetry is a measured and rhythmical language, thus laying the basis of its *formal* criterion: verse. But the definition went much further: "A poem is poetic, provided that it is full of meaning and reproduces human and divine problems." The definition, therefore, distinguishes between the poem and poetry: form alone differentiates the poem from prose, but in order that a poem be poetry, it must have something more: an important content. Poetry, therefore, must realize two conditions: it must be in measured verse and it must have, furthermore, an important content. Poetry is the art of the word. But in antiquity, history, philosophy and eloquence could make the same claim. The first task of poetics consisted in distinguishing them from poetry.

POETRY AND HISTORY

At first, the ancients posed as an axiom the fact that all human activity must have truth as its end: poetry no less than history. Later, they discerned a difference precisely with regard to this aim. This difference was stated in a formulation dating from the first century B. C. It drew distinctions among history (true), false history, and fable; in Latin: *historia, argumentum* and *fabula.*

Poetry overlapped two of these domains: the fable and "false" history. In one case, its content is improbable; in the other it is possible; but in both cases it is fictive (*ficta res*). One may, therefore, briefly sum up the difference between poetry and history: they are distinct because one deals with reality, the other with fiction.

History serves the truth, while poetry can only serve pleasure, since it does not serve the truth. Cicero concludes: "Other laws must govern poetry than those governing history, if the latter envisages only truth and the former pleasure above all."

POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY

To the ancients, relationship of poetry to philosophy appeared incomparably more difficult to elucidate than its connection with history. More strictly, one should say the relationship of poetry to science in general, since by philosophy they understood all

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science with the exception of history, which they held to be a chronicle and not a science. At the beginning, poetry and science were endowed with the same purpose: knowledge of the gods and of men. So long as the ancients had no philosophy they sought the explanation of the world and of life in poetry, especially in Homer. Thus was born the claim of poetry to be, not a fiction, but a means of knowledge. From its very beginning, philosophy had to struggle against this claim of poetry to know and explain the world. From that arose those unforeseen disagreements between poetry and philosophy, disagreements of which so many echoes are found in Plato. During the Hellenistic epoch, the poetry-philosophy antagonism was attenuated.

Two contradictory opinions were now in the lists. On the one hand the Epicureans condemned poetry because it presented the world in another way than did science. The Sceptics went so far as to say that if there is any philosophy in poetry, it is always bad philosophy. But, on the other hand, the Stoic Poseidonius ranked poetry alongside of philosophy, saying that it also "reproduced divine and human problems." This formulation was picked up again by numerous authors, Cicero, Seneca, Strabo, Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre. In poetry and in philosophy they saw two forms of knowledge, distinct, but in the long run, harmonious. It is true that poetry makes use of metrical verse, but, said Strabo, that is not the essential point; it makes use of measure only to attract the masses, and aside from that, poetry and philosophy are one and the same thing.

In the conception of poetry of the ancients, there appeared two very distinct and even opposed currents—poetry created *fictions* and it knew the truth. Little by little, one or the other of these themes prevailed: when poetry was set in opposition to history, the accent was placed on the fiction; when it approached philosophy, the accent was placed on the truth which in contained.

POETRY AND RHETORIC

The relationship between poetry and rhetoric considerably troubled the ancients, for they were very well aware of the fact that these disciplines were close without being identical.

A. Today what seems to differentiate them most is that

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poetry is *written*—rhetoric *spoken.* However, in antiquity poetry remained for a very long while oral poetry, spoken or chanted by rhapsodes, recited by actors. While the speeches of the great orators were not only delivered or listened to in public, but also published and read.

B. The Greeks also invented another criterion to distinguish the two genres: Poetry is made to please people, rhetoric to guide them (*flectere*). But the speeches of the ancients also claimed rank as works of art and aimed to give pleasure, while their poetry, dramatic poetry especially, aspired not only to please but also to demonstrate and to convince, to engage in battle against certain conceptions, while implanting others.

C. Third distinction: Poetry is concerned with *fiction*, while rhetoric is concerned with very real social problems. Poetry, therefore, was distinguished from rhetoric by everything which already set it apart from history. The Romans, however, were less inclined to accept this point of view, for their orators were trained in school on subjects which were quite as fictive (*declamationes*) and, in the course of time, they more often had occasion to continue these exercises than make actual speeches in public.

D. Finally, there appeared a fourth fundamental distinction: A poem is a work in measured *verse*, rhetoric is a work in *prose*. This absorption of rhetoric into literary prose—at the same time drawing a distinction between them—had a historical basis inasmuch as discourses—from Gorgias to Isocrates—constituted the first, and for a long time, the only means of expression for artistic efforts in prose. Thus it happened that rhetoric soon became a theory of prose in general. And so the division of the *genres* was definitively worked out: poetics was the esthetic of works in verse, rhetoric was the esthetic of works in prose.

POETRY AND TRUTH

The general problems of ancient poetry were subsumed under three rubrics: the relationship of poetry to the True, to the Good, and to the Beautiful.

In the earliest times of antiquity, two opinions confronted each other with regard to the problem of truth: one, reproaching poetry because its essence was a lie, the other, on the contrary,

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sustaining that its essence is very much the truth, but a metaphorical truth. These two opinions agreed in considering that there could not be good poetry without truth.

During the Hellenistic epoch, however, a very sharp change came about: little by little, the conviction grew that truth was not sufficient for poetry. The poet has the right to make use of fictions. Plutarch counterposed poetry to life. Lucian maintained that poetry is opposed to history as freedom is opposed to truth. Eratosthenes went so far as to say that anything is permitted a poet, anything which he needs in order to influence human souls.

At the beginning, the ancients did not hesitate to sacrifice freedom, provided that it was not deprived of what they considered essential: the teaching of the truth. Later, however, poetic truth deceived them; they were ready to sacrifice it in turn, on condition that thereby its freedom might be maintained. Little by little, they came to the point of setting up a fundamental distinction corresponding to the modern distinction between form and content. When one spoke about truth and knowledge with regard to poetry, that only concerned the content. At the same time, the conviction began to spread that the important aspect of poetry is precisely the form and not the content. "It is not suitable to judge poems in terms of the thoughts which they contain, or to expect precise knowledge from them," wrote Eratosthenes. And in Philodemus we may read "The fact that a poem contains beautiful thoughts or may be full of wisdom, is not in itself a virtue."

POETRY AND THE GOOD

A very similar evolution with regard to the rapport between poetry and the idea of the Good occurred during the Hellenistic epoch. In its origin the conception of poetry among the Greeks was strongly characterized by moralism; they believed that it had a reason for being only when it served the state and virtue, when it taught, educated and elevated souls. Plato went to the extreme in this attitude: he considered poetry morally harmful. Plato's successors were no less strongly convinced of the harmfulness of poetry, while, at the same time, they began to doubt whether it really had to be morally useful. Of course, Marcus Aurelius wanted

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to see poetry serve as a school of life, Athenaeus as a means of preventing and curing evil. But other convictions were opposed to that. According to Philodemus, one cannot at the same time be concerned with amusing people and educating them. "Virtue does not amuse people."

The old debate: What must poetry do? Teach or enchant? was most often settled by a compromise. Cicero expected a "necessary utility" as well as "free joys" from poetry. Horace wrote that poetry must "teach as well as charm," *docere* and *delectare.* Another compromise formula which he launched, stipulated that poetry must be *utile* and *dulce* all at once, that it must be useful to us and, at the same time, give us pleasure.

The fundamental distinction had already been set forth by Theophrastus. According to him, two kinds of literature existed: *logos pros pragma* and *logos pros tous akroatas.* In other words, literature concerned with its subject and literature concerned with its auditor. During the Hellenistic epoch, it was realized that there was place for both. This literature of the second kind should be judged according to its influence on people's morality and condemned when this influence was proved to be nefarious. But there is also place for literature of the first kind. And, little by little it was believed that in poetry it is this above all which counts.

POETRY AND BEAUTY

The evolution of the relationship, poetry-beauty, during the Hellenistic epoch is exactly opposite to that of the relationships: poetry-truth and poetry-good. The classical era again connected poetry with the true and the good, but not with the beautiful. It is only in the Hellenistic epoch which reduced the role of the true and the good in poetry to the minimum and sought to assign a more important place in it to beauty.

Hellenistic poetics drew a distinction in poetry between beauty which came from nature and beauty introduced by art. And it drew attention to the fact that what counts most in poetry is this latter type of beauty: offering as proof, for example, that descriptions of ugly things may be very beautiful. Poetry imitates with beauty but it does not necessarily imitate beauty; what counts is *how* it says it and not *what* it says.

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Secondly, the ancients drew a distinction between *general* beauty, common and accessible to all, and *individual* beauty, variable according to the man, the circumstances of time and place. This individual beauty was called *prepon* by the Greeks, *decorum* by the Romans. In the Hellenistic period, growing importance was attached to individual beauty, to the *decorum* of the poem. In order that the latter be beautiful, it must be (to use Hermogenes' terms) suitable and well chosen. Quintilian wrote: *Omnibus debetur suum decor*, everything has its apposite form. And Dionysius of Halicarnassus: "There are four great sources whence language derives its charm and beauty: melody, thythm, variations and fitness to subject." To represent beautifully, wrote Plutarch, means to represent suitably, hence beautiful things should be represented with beauty and ugly things with ugliness.

The beauty of poetry evidently consists in order, harmony, measure—that is a tradition of ancient thought. But Hellenism added grandeur, magnificence, a sense of the pathetic to these qualities. And also elegance, and diversity. The Epicurean, Philodemus, cites among "qualities of poetic expression": evidence, solidity, conciseness, precision, clarity, and measure. The list of the Stoic, Diogenes of Babylon, scarcely differs since it contains five qualities: linguistic correctness, clarity, conciseness, measure and precise construction. Diversity is pleasurable to us, *varietas delectat*: the writers of the Hellenistic period often repeat this precept. Plutarch tells us that what is simple arouses neither feelings nor imagination. Hellenistic writers also discerned the great power of literature in what they called *enargeia*, *evidentia*, evidence, plasticity.

Numerous problems came to light in the poetics of ancient times: imitation or imagination? Wisdom or enthusiasm? Intuition or rules? Nature or art? The sublime or the charming? What are the most precious qualities in a poet?

IMITATION OR IMAGINATION

A very sharp change took place during the Hellenistic period in the conception of the poet and the artist in general, whose role, previously passive, became active. In the oldest times, the artist and poet was only an imitator; for Hellenism he became a creator

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much more dependent on his imagination than on the reality which he was imitating. The Greeks of the classic era scarcely were aware of the existence of the imagination. Now, in the Hellenistic epoch they already considered it a determining factor in poetry. They began to juxtapose it against imitation. "*Mimesis* only represents what it has seen, phantasy also represents what it never could have seen," wrote Philostratus. Blind rhapsodists were in fashion. Homer's blindness was treated almost as a symbol and proof of how the imagination may surpass the senses in power.

Expressing a current idea of his epoch, Seneca maintained that for a work of art to be born—besides the four elements recognized as indispensable—the artist, his project, the material, and the form which he gives his material—a fifth is also necessary, that is, "What the artist contemplates while he is creating his work." And he adds that "Art is not at all concerned in knowing whether the model under observation is found in the outside world or within the artist, conceived entirely by his imagination." Classic Greece was convinced that the model for art always belonged to the external world. It was only during Hellenistic times that it was realized that the artist could very well bear the model within himself. This inner model was called "image" (*eikon*) and more often, "idea." Cicero made use of this term, drawing from Plato, although he deprived it of its Platonic meaning, transforming transcendent being into the artist's and poet's representation, transporting the ideas from the other world into the soul. Plutarch claimed that the idea within the poet's spirit is "pure, independent and infallible."

WISDOM OR ENTHUSIASM?

Hellenistic as well as Latin writers found themselves in accord on the necessity of thought in poetry. The Stoic, Crates of Pergamon, considered that "only a sage is capable of appreciating the beauties of poetry." Cicero said that "what is called prudence is indispensable in practicing the arts." And Horace: "wisdom is the source and very beginning of all good writing." (*Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons*). Without it, inspiration would be of little avail.

But the inverse is also true; wisdom does not suffice for a poet

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if inspiration is lacking. Greek as well as Latin writers voluntarily made use of the Greek word *enthousiasmos* to designate this state of inspiration. The word in itself indicates only that something is divine. Certain writers literally conceived of inspiration as a state of supernatural grace; others saw in it only a state of the interior tension of the poet. Platonists explained it by the intervention of the gods; Epicureans by natural causes. Some stressed inspiration; others wisdom or knowledge. But in the long run all Hellenistic writers agreed: both aspects were strictly indispensable to the poetic work.

INTUITION OR RULES

In antiquity, the notion of art was indissolubly linked with that of rules. A production not making use of rules did not correspond to their idea of art. If at the beginning they hesitated to rank poetry among the arts, it was because they believed that it is governed by inspiration and not by rules. However, during the Hellenistic era a double change came about. On the one hand it was recognized that poetry like all the other arts is governed by precise rules. On the other, it was observed that the importance of rules in poetry and the arts was not as great as had been believed.

Little by little, the idea grew that rules of art could not be immutable, that in any case it was never a question of blindly obeying them. And more important: that rules are secondary with regard to art, for first there were the works of art and only on the basis of these works were rules of art subsequently elaborated. "Verse preceded reflection about verse." And furthermore, as Lucian said: "everything has its beauty." This could not be expressed by rules. And since there are limits to the sovereign empire of rules, there must be scope for the poet's freedom. But also for the reader's freedom. Philodemus quotes Aristo of Chios: "There must be poetry for all tastes." And Pseudo-Longinus frankly declares "let each one enjoy what pleases him."

Along with the immoderate respect for rules, the ancients had always taken it for granted that correctness was the highest quality in poetry. Now, a new conception found its defenders: namely, that grandeur is more important than correctness. "Correctness

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only avoids criticism, grandeur evokes admiration"—wrote Pseudo-Longinus. And he concludes thus: "Great writers are rarely correct."

INTELLECT OR THE SENSES

An anonymous writer known only as Pseudo-Syrianus strongly expresses anti-intellectualism, almost to a Bergsonian degree. The intellect (*logos*) makes it possible for us to grasp the elements of things, but their totality can be grasped only by a direct impression (*aisthesis*). The intellect seizes things and forms only in a symbolic way inasmuch as it is incapable of seizing them directly. It is the artist's task to present images which are not only symbolic but direct, concrete images of things.

The debate did not concern only the poet but also the reader, not only the work of art but also the esthetic emotion. That poetry addresses itself to the hearing was a commonplace of ancient esthetics. However, there were numerous critics who believed, like Pseudo-Longinus, that the harmony of language "speaks directly to the soul and not only to the sense of hearing." Nevertheless, ancient poetics, in the course of its development, stoutly tended to augment the role of hearing. The importance of this purely sensory element was defended especially by the Stoics and Diogenes of Babylon among others, who drew a distinction between common and developed sensations: the harmony of language, he claimed, is only perceptible by means of the latter.

NATURE OR ART

Besides the four other great debates of Hellenism—imitation or phantasy, wisdom or enthusiasm, intuition or rules, intellect or the senses—the fifth was: nature or art? In this debate, "nature" signified nothing other than the nature of the poet, his natural talents. Which is more important: the talent which the poet has received as his share from nature, or the art which he can learn? Just as in all the other debates the sympathies of the epoch tipped sharply toward one side of the balance, toward phantasy, intuition and enthusiasm, so here a sort of compromise was established. "Is the success of a poetic work due to the talent or to the art

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of the author?" asks Horace. "Hov often the attempt has been made to resolve this question. As far as I am concerned, I can't see what is the use of knowledge alone; lacking the vein of poetry, everything is like talent without education."

Generally, the compromise formula was more complete, composed not of two, but three terms: nature, practice, art. Alongside nature (that is to say, the innate talent of the poet) and art (that is, knowledge of the rules), practice must still intervene, the writer's experience, his know-how, permitting him to profit by his subject and his knowledge of the art. Stobaeus quotes a poem which declares that the poet needs knowledge of his means, creative passion, a sense of measure, a competent critical ability, a steady mind, experience and wisdom. In this enumeration, "knowledge of means" corresponds to what is commonly called art or skill, and "creative passion" to what was called the poet's nature.

THE SUBLIME OR CHARM

Of all the antitheses of Hellenistic poetics, that which dealt with the very value of poetry itself undoubtedly went deepest. Two ideas were here engaged in mortal combat: beauty (*kalon*) and pleasure (*hedu*). The first represented the rational elements of poetry (*logikon*), the second, the irrational elements (*alogon*).

The poetics of very ancient times made no distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, pleasure and charm. "I consider that grace, charm, agreeable sonority, sweetness, attractiveness, etc., belong to the category of pleasure," wrote Dionysius of Halicarnassus. "While magnificence, seriousness, dignity, majestic language, an archaic tone, etc., belong to the category of beauty." The sublime ceased to be an esthetic category, one of the poetic styles; it became style *par excellence*, the only style, the perfect style. For Horace, *pulcher* meant nothing but sublime: *omnis poesis grandis*.

Compared with sublimity and grandeur in a work of art, pleasure and charm are relegated to the second rank by certain authors like Pseudo-Longinus. But, nonetheless, many had a tendency to join beauty with pleasure. According to Dionysius, beauty and pleasure are indeed the purpose of all works of truth

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and art; when this goal is reached there is nothing more to expect. The same Dionysius wrote: "The principles of a beautiful composition are no different than those of a pleasing composition. In both cases it is a question of a noble melody, a lofty rhythm, a rich diversity, and measure at all times." In Hellenistic poetics this union of beauty and pleasure became the formula for excellence in poetry.

FORM OR CONTENT

This theory of poetics had already developed concepts of form and content very similar to our own. Indeed, within the poem it distinguished between the verbal expression (*lexis*) and the thing expressed (*pragma*), the first corresponding to the form, the second to the content.

Even before the Hellenistic period, the Greeks were already familiar with two modern variations on the notion of form: (a) form insofar as it is a disposition of the parts; in form thus conceived they saw the very essence of beauty. But also: (b) form insofar as it is the artist's manner of treating his subject; in other words, not what he said, but how he said it. In Hellenistic times, a new variation of this idea made its appearance: form considered as that which is directly offered to the senses, as opposed to everything which is indirect, abstract, conceived by thought. This variant of the notion of form, destined to become so important in our day, was precisely what Hellenistic esthetics began to treat as essential. Debates began over the question of investigating what determined the value of poetry: its linguistic form or its intellectual content, in other words, the language or the subject.

Certain schools, like the Epicurean and Stoic, in terms of their very principles, had to grant primary importance to noble or useful content in poetry. But there were also "formalists." What we know of Hellenistic formalism surprises us by its radicalism. None of the treatises written by its zealots have come down to us, but we are familiar with them through their enemy, Philodemus. The names of the first formalists were Crates of Pergamon, Heracleodorus and Andromenides. They were often recruited from among the Stoics and Peripatetics. All their activity took place at the beginning of the Hellenistic period, in the third

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century A. D. Crates maintained that good poems are characterized by pleasant sounds; Heracleodorus, that just hearing a pleasant arrangement of sounds is sufficient by itself to grasp the totality of a poetic work. All three were of the opinion that the thought contained within the poem neither added nor took away any of its beauty.

The ancient world of course, never doubted that poetry is perceived through hearing it, that we hear the words, their rhythm and their harmony with our ears. But this failed to settle the question whether we also become aware of the composition of the poem simply by hearing it and whether, therefore, our ears are sufficient to pass judgment about the value of a poem. Such was the opinion of the formalists; they considered that the total meaning of poetry is simply a matter of hearing. This thesis found numerous defenders toward the end of the Hellenistic period and during Roman times. Even Quintilian considered the ears the best judges of a composition (*optime... iudicant aures*). And Dionysius of Halicarnassus: "Beautiful language is necessarily composed of beautiful words and beautiful words are composed of beautiful syllables... The fundamental construction of the syllables determines the different variations of language in which the characters, passions, atmosphere, and behavior of the characters manifest themselves." There was, however, a considerable difference: these writers attached the greatest importance to form in poetry but they never went so far as to deny the importance of the content; they were partisans of form but they were not formalists, like Crates or Heracleodorus. In short, a purely acoustical conception of poetry did not find many defenders in the Hellenistic period. Philodemus found the claim to "judge a good composition not by reason, but by a trained hearing" perfectly ridiculous. And Pseudo-Longinus, although he was at the philosophical antipodes from Philodemus, came to the same conclusion: an artistic composition speaks to the soul, not only to the hearing.

The two terms, form-content, were not set in opposition in the same way as had the ancients: Hellenistic thought was much too complex (and thereby less subject to ambivalence). Thus, the Stoic, Aristo of Chios, made use of a juxtaposition of four terms: the thought (expressed by the poetic work), the characters (repre-

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sented in it) its sounds, its composition. The thought and the characters grew into what was later called the content; the sounds and the composition developed into what was later called the form.

CONVENTIONS OR UNIVERSAL JUDGMENTS?

And a final problem: Are judgments of poetry objective and universal? Here also opinions of Hellenistic writers were divided. Some of them maintained that "in itself," by "nature," poetry is neither good nor bad, it only seems so to us. Through Philodemus, we have learned of the existence of those who admitted that judgments on poetry are only based on conventions and that there cannot be any universal objective judgment of a poem. But he himself had a different opinion: while admitting that literary criteria were conventional, nevertheless he believed they were universal. Similarly, the anonymous author of the work, *On the Sublime*, held that despite differences of manners, customs, and usage all people were of the same opinion with regard to the same things.

The question was to determine whether these criteria on poetry originated in experience, or whether they came from the one passing judgment, constituting *conventions* accepted by the latter. In accordance with their theory of knowledge, the Stoics appealed to experience; the Epicureans, on the other hand, were inclined, in terms of their principles, to conceive of criteria of esthetic judgment as conventions.

II

The practice of poetry began at the beginning of the Middle Ages; theories of poetry came much later. Of course, the foundations of Christian esthetics were laid as early as the fourth century, but those who established them concerned themselves relatively little with poetry. Augustine was more interested in music; Basil in painting; and the metaphysico-esthetics of the Pseudo-Areopagite were of no importance to poetics. But the traditional esthetics of the ancient world survived in its main lines. Of course, certain Church fathers treated it with scorn. Saint Jerome wrote: "I don't see what Horace has to do with a psalter," but Horace was known,

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his poetics were made use of, and already in the eighth century one of Alcuin's disciples wrote a commentary on it.

Treatises especially devoted to poetry—manuals of poetic art, called "poetries" or *artes poeticae*—began to appear more abundantly only toward the twelfth century. A number of these have come down to us: a treatise in verse by Marbaud, dating from the eleventh century (toward 1035-1123), *De ornamentis verborum*; two treatises dating from the twelfth century, one by Conrad of Hirschau and the *Ars versificatoria* by Mathieu de Vendôme (born 1130); later, dating from the thirteenth century: *Poetria nova* by Jean de Garlande (1195-1272 circa); the *Poetria* by Godefroi de Vinsauf (born in 1249), and the treatise by Gervais de Melkley (born in 1185). A great many of these works came from Orléans and Paris. In general, drawing very copiously from the poetics and rhetoric of the ancient world, and deriving certain classifications and concepts from them, nevertheless these works contained several new observations and ideas.

At that time, medieval poetry and literature were already in full flower. The great church hymns had already long been composed; the domain of poetry had just been considerably extended; the specific forms of the medieval theatre were born, and the laic poetry of the troubadours made its appearance alongside religious poetry. Nevertheless, the poetics of that time were not, as one might imagine, the expression of contemporary poetry; the scholars who drew up the rules took far less account of the poetry of their own time than of classic theories of poetry, scraps of which had come down to them; they had a limitless faith in such fragments on which they traced their own speculations and theses. For this reason, although they introduced relatively few novelties, their contributions did assure continuity in the development of poetics.

One should, however, note a new fact, unkown in antiquity: poetry had just been numbered among the arts. It is true, of course, that in his classification of the arts, that excellent eleventh century philosopher, Hugh of St. Victor still hesitates to treat poetry as an art in the full sense of the word, but deals with it as "supplementary to the arts" (*appendix artium*). But Rudolph of Longchamp, known under the nickname of Ardens, had already abandoned—in his classification of the arts—the attitude of the

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ancients who considered poetry as a work of inspiration and not of art. Longchamp, on the contrary, included poetry among the arts and treated it as one of the four great domains of art.

KINDS OF POETRY

The verbal arts (*sermo, oratio*) were more or less divided by medieval poetics into poetry and prose. Form as well as content distinguishes poetry from prose. Like Poseidonius, Mathieu de Vendôme defined poetry as the capacity to enclose a grave and serious content within a metrical form (*Poesis est scientia, quae gravem et illustrem orationem claudit in metro*). And he defined verse (*versus*) as words in metrical form, ornamented with beautiful expressions and beautiful thoughts, in which there is nothing either mediocre or pointless. Certain texts lead us to believe that medieval authors considered the musical aspects of the work (*elegans iunctura dictionum*) and the precise expression of the quality of things (*expressio proprietatum*) as much more important in poetry than the judicious choice of words and sonorities. But often, particularly when it was a question of distinguishing poetry from prose and especially from history, they abandoned these new distinctions and picked up the arguments of the ancients, namely, that poetry is that literary genre which is concerned with invention and not with truth. Conrad of Hirschau wrote that the poet is *fictor* and *formator*, in other words, he who shapes and creates, he who speaks *pro veris falsa*.

Medieval poetics attached great importance to a detailed classification of literature. The *Poetria* of Jean de Garlande included four divisions, each drawn up from a different point of view.

(a) From the point of view of verbal form, literature is divided into poetry and prose. Among the different kinds of prose, it lists technographic (that is to say, scientific), historical, epistolary and rhythmic prose. The latter corresponds to what would later become literary prose.

(b) From the point of view of the role of the author, literature is divided—here following the example of the ancients—into imitative literature (*imitativum*), narrative literature (*enarrativum*) and mixed literature (*mixtum*). In the first category, the

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author speaks through the mouth of his heroes, in the other two, he speaks for himself.

(c) From the point of view of truth, the thesis classified literature according to those three categories borrowed from ancient writers: *historia, fabula, argumentum.*

(d) From the point of view of the feelings expressed, it divided poetic works into tragedies (which begin happily and end sadly) and comedies (which develop inversely).

RULES, TALENT AND GRACE

Medieval poetics stipulated that three things were necessary to literary creation: theory, practice and reading. In other words, knowledge of the rules, personal talent, but also being acquainted with good authors, who could provide models. This third point was an addition—and a very characteristic one—of the Middle Ages to the poetics of the ancient world.

These poetics, however, gave primary importance to theory. Which comes back to saying that they conceived of literary creation as subject to certain universal rules. They tended to codify all literary creation, and theoretically to exhaust all its possibilities. Thus, for example, Godefroi makes a list of new ways of beginning a story, as if there could not be any others. The conviction that poetry was in no way different in this regard from the other arts, that it was also only a matter of rules, was highly characteristic of medieval poetics. It judged that the value of a work depends especially on correctly observing the rules, and it considered the work not in terms of what differentiated the poet from the scholar, but, on the contrary, on what drew them closer.

In line with the entirely rational concept of poetry, which was that of the Middle Ages, medieval poetics required poetry to be always comprehensible. John of Salisbury wrote that poets were wrong in boasting that their works could not be understood without commentaries. But it was difficult to reconcile this requirement with another *motif* of medieval poetics, which formulated, in fact, with regard to good poetry, the requirement of an allegorical sense; poetry was supposed to represent supernatural things in natural things. And the allegorical sense was not always

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easily perceptible. Thus, one often encounters in medieval poetics phrases such as that said to have been derived from the Abbé Bremont: "The best songs are those which one does not understand at first hearing."

THE MIND, HEARING, AND CUSTOM

Medieval poetics was very much interested in the *subjective* side of poetry, in its effect on reader and listener, and it attempted to observe this phenomenon from rather close range. It maintained that poetry had to and could act on several mental faculties at the same time. Verse form in itself facilitated comprehension, maintained attention, fought fatigue. At the same time, poetry must teach and delight the mind, as it delights the ear: *esto quod mulcet animum sic mulcet aurem* wrote Godefroi. Submitted thus to the judgment of the ear and of the mind, wrote this same author, this double judgment is nonetheless insufficient; there must always be the judgment of custom.

Here we have a concept due strictly to the Middle Ages, independent of the ancients: nothing can please which is contrary to convention. It was even considered that convention was a decisive factor in all judgments levied on a work of art: *Iudex... summus qui terminet—usus.* And, at the same time, account was taken of the fact that different peoples, environments, and epochs had different customs. This idea introduced a certain amount of relativism into the objective and rationalistic poetics of the Middle Ages.

ELEGANCE

Medieval poetics revealed themselves no less perspicacious concerning the objective properties of poetry, formulating in this regard numerous requirements. One might expect that religious qualities would be found in the forefront among these requirements—not at all, there is no talk about this in medieval poetics. Was it because religious qualities were taken for granted, or else because they fell under the jurisdiction of theology and not poetics? Poetics, in turn, enumerated a long list of other qualities, similar to those which ancient theoreticians had developed: measure (*moderata venustas*, as Godefroi calls it) and

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the correctness with which words relate to the content (medieval writers here spoke of *congruum* while the ancients used *decorum* and *aptum*). As for the most important qualities of literature, medieval poetics listed: pleasure, beauty, utility, or else, elegance, composition, majesty. Medieval poetics, far more than those of antiquity, stressed elegance. This ideal of the poets and theoreticians of the twelfth century, the term most in vogue in the poetics of those times, signified: refinement, correctness, a perfect state of finish, and suitability of expression (*elegantia est, quae facit, ut locutio sit congrua, propria et apta*). The term, elegance, also signified charm and ornamentation, in contrast with the severe beauty of classic times. It therefore united within itself all the basic qualities of poetry, it was the expression of its perfection.

It was a quality both of form and content. Mathieu de Vendôme wrote: "A poem owes its elegance as much to the innate beauty of its subject as to the external ornamentation of the words, as much also to the manner of saying things." *Venustas interioris sententiae* here signifies the content, while *superficialis ornatus verborum* and *modus dicendi* designate the form.

THE FORM OF POETRY

Form—that is, the sonority of the rhythm (*dulcisoni numeri*) and the beauty of the words (*verba polita*)—was considered by medieval poetics as a superficial beauty (*superficialis*), purely ornamental (*ornatus*) "like embroidered pearls." But these external ornamentations were held to be indispensable to poetry. What is much more remarkable—a double outward form was observed: auditory and spiritual. The qualities of auditory form are harmony, rhythm, musicality, sweetness of tone (*suavitas cantilenae*). This form is a question of music. One might say that a good poem is *nihil aliud quam fictio rhetorica in musicaque posita.*

But besides this, poetry also possesses spiritual form: a beautiful noble style appropriate to the content. But while the first form is musical, the second is strictly literary. This was called the manner of expressing oneself (*modus dicendi*) and also the quality (*qualitas*) or color (*color*) of the language. It constituted the domain of images, tropes, poetic figurations well-known and cultivated since antiquity. If medieval poetics emphasized the melody

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of a poem, it attached still greater importance to the choice of images, words and metaphors. Although all this was treated as pictorial ornamentation, nevertheless it was considered much more important than the musical aspects. It was believed that the richness and pomp of the language differentiated poetry from prose: in poetry, the words must be like Sunday garments. Something particularly important: all these poetic ornaments were not the result of the free phantasy of the poet, but subject to rules which can and must be codified.

Gervais de Melkley claimed that stylistic ornaments rested on three principles: identity, similarity and contrast (*identitas, similitudo et contrarietas... eloquentiae generant venustatem*). These are the three principles which psychologists in our day enumerate as the principles of association. And there is nothing astonishing in such a coincidence: because stylistic ornaments consist of comparisons, associations of objects and words, with other objects and other words.

Medieval poetics formulated with regard to poetry the need for a good style but it recognized that there could be various kinds of good styles. In the first place, for the simple reason that all thought could be expressed simply or directly (*ductus simplex*) or else in an oblique, indirect, subtle, and figured manner (*ductus figuratus, oblicus, subtilis*). It is true that the Middle Ages believed that all literature must necessarily be ornamented, but it accepted two types of ornamentation: easy (*ornatus facilis*) and difficult (*difficilis*). Hence the diversity of styles. Poetics were concerned especially with difficult, figured style; Godefroi cites seven forms of this style: one which employs the sign for the thing, or subject for object, or cause for effect, or effect for cause, or quality for substance, or the part for the whole, or the whole for the part.

Also, following the example of the ancients, medieval poetics drew a distinction among three styles: humble, average, and grandiloquent (*sunt igitur tres styli: humilis, mediocris, grandiloquus*). Also like the ancients, it placed grandiloquent style ahead of all the others. Only the terminology changed: while the poetics of the ancient world spoke of three genres (*species* or *genus*), the medievalists employed a new word which was later to be very much in vogue, that of "styles" (*styli*). This term as also of ancient origin but little used by the ancients.

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THE CONTENT OF POETRY

Despite all the importance attached to form, the men of the Middle Ages were convinced that it was the content especially (*interior sententia*) which counted most in poetry. Beauty dwells not only in the form, but also in the content. The latter enjoys a certain priority: for the author must first formulate his thought before being able to clothe it in adequate words (*prior est sententiae conceptio, sequitur verborum excogitatio*). And the work must reside in the heart before it can rise to the lips.

Despite its faith in rules, medieval poetics did not leave less freedom and initiative to the poet than did Aristotelian poetics. Although it insisted on descriptive precision, it recommended exercising a choice among the outstanding qualities of the object described (*quod prae ceteris dominatur*). It also recommended that certain traits be stressed (*ampliari*). And even the idealization of the object described. And finally, Mathieu's poetics maintained that the beauty of poetry is different than real beauty, pointing out that ugliness well depicted in poetry is more pleasing than beauty poorly depicted.

THE POSTULATES OF POETRY

If one must enumerate the postulates of medieval poetics, it is useful first of all to grasp those concerning the content of the poem. Primarily, the postulate of morality, then that of reality—but also others. Poetry was limited to serious subjects (*pondus rerum*), frivolous subjects were banned. Poetry required loftiness of spirit, commonplace subjects were proscribed. Poetry required allegory: this basic rule was infinitely more important than in antiquity because the classical immanent and transparent image of the world had been replaced by a transcendent and mysterious image of the world. Beyond their literal meaning (*sensus litteralis*), the slightest words and images had, from now on, their figurative meaning (*figuralis*) and their spiritual or allegorical meaning (*spiritualis vel allegoricus*).

Besides these postulates concerning content, there were others concerning form. Poetry was held to be a literary composition open (in the terminology of the period: *dispositio*) to richness

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and ornamentation. But at the same time, its verbal expression had to be clear; ambiguity was not allowed. It had to be suitably finished; sketches, suggestions, impressions were little appreciated. The work had to be complete, achieved. From this point of view, the age demanded of poetry what it demanded of the plastic arts: according to medieval esthetics a pictorial work must arouse admiration when one looks at it through a magnifying glass. Similarly, poetry also had to be precise; the art of the poet was compared to that of the jeweler.

Medieval theories of poetics also reveal admiration for refinement, for foreign works which aroused curiosity (*curiositas*). Pictorial values were highly prized: poetic brilliance (*nitor*) and the color of poetic figuration (*color rhetoricus*). Similarly, musical values (*suavitas cantilenae*) were highly appreciated. In linking the plastic point of view with the musical point of view, one praised the *color rhythmicus* of poetry.

THE AIM OF POETRY

What did the Middle Ages mean by the aim of poetry? It did not conceive of anything which might be an end in itself; nor did it imagine that this end might be beauty, perfection, felicitious expression. First of all, its end was to inform, to teach: the frontier between poetry and knowledge had not yet been sharply drawn. Secondly, it had to play an ethical role: in this realm many important tasks were assigned to it. It was believed that the charm of poetry ennobled the soul, aroused pious feelings, inculcated obedience, revived one's strength, incited to action. And thirdly, the aim of poetry was simply to give pleasure. If the first tasks raised the poet to the rank of the savant and preacher, the last debased him to the ranks of the jongleurs.

Medieval theories of poetics grew directly out of the Greco-Roman tradition. Or out of the principles of scholasticism. Nevertheless, the experience of living poetry also invaded it, sometimes turning traditional and aprioristic theses upside down. All medieval systems of poetics advanced the dogma that poetry is strictly subject to universal rules; nevertheless all of them recognized that its effect depended on the reader's personal habits. Each system of poetics put forward another dogma: that poetry must

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be in harmony with reason, but they recognized that people were often most pleased with what they did not understand. And the most important innovations of medieval poetics are due much more to experience than to tradition and system-building. These innovations are: the distinction between sensuous and intellectual form, the requirement that sensuous form possess musicality as well as plasticity, the distinction in poetry between facile and difficult beauty, and finally, the imperative of elegance.

CONCLUSION

One may say, in conclusion, that in the course of almost twenty centuries elapsing between the classic poetics of the Greeks and modern poetics, between Aristotle on the one hand, and Ronsard and Boileau on the other:

1) poetics knew long periods of stagnation but also periods of animation and creativity, especially during the third and first centuries B. C. and twelfth century A. D.;

2) from the beginning of this period of 2000 years, and still in the Hellenistic period, from the first post-Aristotelian generations on, poetics knew how to adopt a new independent point of view, overcome the unilateralism of classical poetics and develop, up to the end of antiquity, with a great deal of uniformity and continuity;

3) during the Middle Ages it was able to guarantee the continuity of its development, maintaining many of the principles and theories inherited from the ancient world, changing, however, their character and tendency;

4) the beginning of modern times scarcely made a breach in the principles and doctrines of traditional poetics. They remained basically the same as in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Aristotle and Horace were always held up as unchallengeable authorities. Truly new ideas which today seem perfectly convincing to us are the result of the poetics of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

* For more ample details see the History of Esthetics in 2 volumes (*Estetyka starozytna* and *Estetyka sredniowieczna*) by the same author, Ossolineum, Wroclaw, 1960.

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