

SCHILLER, A PHILOSOPHICAL POET.

Again and again has the question been raised whether philosophical or scientific poetry is possible, and upon the whole it has been answered in the negative. I beg to differ from the commonly accepted view and would say that poetry may invade any domain without ceasing to be poetry. The main difficulty of philosophical and scientific poetry lies in the restriction of the subject to an extremely limited public and that is the reason why philosophical poetry does not find the all but universal recognition of love songs.

The possibility of philosophical poetry is best proved by the fact of its existence, but the truth is that the general public has not become acquainted with it or knows it only from hearsay. The large masses will never read, much less appreciate, philosophical poems.

Philosophical poetry is like classical music; few are the connoisseurs that can really judge of its merits. In a certain sense we may call Beethoven the philosopher among composers. His sonatas, though breathing all the freedom of art, exhibit a logical consistency which makes them appear like revelations of the law that is shaping the world; yet, since they are expressed in chords and tone-figures, his compositions appeal directly to sentiment, and their truth is felt even when not fully understood—a fact which considerably widens the audience of the music philosopher. We must not expect such a music philosopher to be as popular as a ragtime composer, and for the same reason poems of philosophical significance will naturally find few admirers.

Philosophical poetry flourished in Germany in the classical period when its intellectual horizon was decked with a galaxy of stars of the first magnitude, such as Klopstock, Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Lessing, Kant, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, and Haydn.

In order to forestall any possible misinterpretation, we must first of all explain what we understand by poetry. Poetry is certainly not limited to meter and rhyme, and philosophical poetry is most assuredly not simply rhymed philosophy. Poetry is sentiment expressed in words, and so anything that effects sentiment can become a fit subject of poetry.

A mathematical theorem and its demonstration are prose. But if the mathematician is overwhelmed with the grandeur and wondrous harmony of geometrical forms, of the importance and universal application of mathematical maxims, or, of the mysterious

simplicity of its manifold laws which are so self-evident and plain and at the same time so complicated and profound, he is touched by the poetry of his science: and if he but understands how to give expression to his feelings, the mathematician turns poet, drawing inspiration from the most abstract domain of scientific thought.

Why a mathematical or otherwise scientific poetry has not yet developed, is due simply to the fact that there are not enough mathematicians in the world to form an audience sufficiently large to make the man of poetical sentiments a real poet as the word is commonly understood: for the poet is made by the people, and public recognition is the true laurel wreath of any real poet laureate. Practically speaking, any one who has poetical sentiments is potentially a poet, and if he expresses his sentiments in words, he becomes in fact a poet to himself. However, a poet is known as one only when he voices such sentiments as will find an echo in the hearts of large multitudes that recognize in him the prophet who can find words for that which they themselves feel but vaguely. Thereby he becomes a poet in name as well as in fact.

Thus the main condition of a poet recognized in literature as great, depends not merely upon himself, but also upon the circumstances under which he writes. No poet can originate in a country where poetry is not appreciated. The poetical galaxy of the classical period of Germany was conditioned by the broad intellectual atmosphere which prevailed at that time, when the Teutons' fatherland was politically weak, but very strong intellectually, having its best intellect concentrated upon international and human ideals. It was an age of cosmopolitan aspirations.

We cannot understand Schiller's attitude in religion and philosophy without bearing in mind the influences which ancient Greece (and especially Plato) exercised upon his mind. His classical ideas, however, were matured through a study of Kant's philosophy, which taught him to distinguish clearly between the formal and the material, in that the formal, represented by the so-called Platonic ideas, is the most essential part of existence from which rise all our ideals, and which alone can lift us into a higher sphere of life.

The purely relational in life seems to be a mere nonentity and yet it is the most important part. It is called in Greek the causal or causative⁶ and is contrasted with the material.⁷

All our spiritual life depends upon the formal. Logic, arithmetic, yea, reason itself is nothing but a systematization of the

⁶ τὸ αἰτιώδες.

⁷ τὸ ἕλικόν.

purely formal aspect of things, and moral aspirations are but its application. Schiller was fully impressed with the significance of the domain of pure form, and so builds his philosophy upon the traditions of classical antiquity modified by Kantism. He sees the contrast between the ideal life, or as he calls it,

"Yonder region of pure forms,
Sunny land e'er free from storms."

and actual life on earth—material existence in which ideas are being realized in the actions of living bodies. The eternal ideals have found an appropriate representation in the mythology of Greece, while bodily existence is regarded as a vale of tears. It is peculiar to see how Schiller's view may be characterized at once as both Hellenic and as Buddhistic, and quotations will bear out these general characterizations.

In his famous poem "The Gods of Greece," he writes:

"Ye in the age gone by,
Who ruled the world—a world how lovely then!—
And guided the steps of happy men
In the light leading-strings of careless joy!
Ah, flourished then your service of delight!
How different, oh, how different, in the day
When thy sweet fanes with many a wreath were bright,
O Venus Amathusia!

"Then the soft veil of dreams
Round Truth poetic witching Fancies wreathed;
Through all creation overflowed the streams
Of life—and things now senseless, felt and breathed.
Man gifted Nature with divinity
To lift and link her to the breast of Love;
All things betrayed to the initiate eye
The track of gods above!

"Where lifeless, fixed afar,
A flaming ball is to our senses given,
Phœbus Apollo, in his golden car,
In silent glory swept the fields of heaven!
Then lived the Dryads in yon forest trees;
Then o'er yon mountains did the Oread roam;
And from the urns of gentle Naiades
Welled the wave's siver foam.

"In the Elysian grove
The Shades renewed the pleasures life held dear:
The faithful spouse rejoined remembered love,
And rushed along the course the charioteer.

"More glorious than the meeds
 To Labor choosing Virtue's path sublime,
 The grand achievers of renowned deeds
 Up to the seats of Gods themselves could climb.

"Art thou, fair world, no more?
 Return, thou virgin-bloom, on Nature's face
 Ah, only on the Minstrel's magic shore,
 Can we the footsteps of sweet Fable trace!
 The meadows mourn for the old hallowing life;
 Vainly we search the earth of gods bereft;
 And where the image with such warmth was rife,
 A shade alone is left!

"Cold, from the North, has gone
 Over the flowers the blast that killed their May;
 And, to enrich the worship of the One,
 A Universe of Gods must pass away.
 Mourning, I search on yonder starry steeps,
 But thee no more, Selene, there I see!
 And through the woods I call, and o'er the deeps,
 No voice replies to me!

"Deaf to the joys she gives—
 Blind to the pomp of which she is possessed—
 Unconscious of the spiritual Power that lives
 Around, and rules her—by our bliss unblessed—
 Dull to the art that colors and creates,
 Like the dead time-piece, godless NATURE creeps
 Her plodding round, and, by the leaden weight,
 The slavish motion keeps.

"To-morrow to receive
 New life, she digs her proper grave to-day;
 And icy moons with weary sameness weave
 From their own light their fulness and decay.
 Home to the Poet's Land the Gods are flown,
 A later age in them small use discerns,
 For now the world, its leading-strings outgrown,
 On its own axle turns.

"Home! and with them are gone
 The hues they gazed on and the tones they heard;
 Life's Beauty and life's Melody:—alone
 Broods o'er the desolate void the lifeless Word.
 Yet, rescued from Time's deluge, still they throng
 Unseen the Pindus they were wont to cherish;
 Ah, that which gains immortal life in Song,
 To mortal life must perish!"

Judging from the text of "The Gods of Greece" it would be inferred that Schiller is hostile to Christianity, but this is not the case. His love for Greek paganism only points out an aspect in the conception of the world, which orthodox Christianity in his time neglected. Schiller himself in a letter to Körner says with reference to "The Gods of Greece": "If I succeed in making out of the shortcomings of religion or ethics a beautiful and consistent whole, I have made a piece of art which is neither immoral nor impious, for the very reason that I took both, not as they are, but as they became after the forceful operation of their separation and new combination. The God whom I criticize in 'The Gods of Greece' is not the God of the philosophers nor the beneficent dream of the multitudes, but he is one abortion out of many erroneous misshapen conceptions. . . . The gods of Greece as I represent them are only the beautiful qualities of Greek mythology comprehended in one general idea."

There is a truth in the polytheism of Greece which, philosophically expressed, would identify the gods with the eternal types of being commonly called Platonic ideas. In this ideal realm there is no sorrow, no grief, no pain, because everything material as well as everything sensual is excluded. It is thus as much contrasted with bodily existence as the Buddhist Nirvana is to the Samsara, the domain of birth and death, the eternal round of existence, the wheel of being.

It is peculiar that as the great founder of Buddhism insisted that Nirvana could be obtained in this life, so Schiller claims that even mortal man can attain to divine serenity. He says:

"Wouldst thou here be like a deity,
In the realm of death be free,
Never seek to pluck its garden's fruit."

The condition of Nirvana according to Buddha is the attainment of enlightenment which involves in its practical application the surrender of all clinging to the pleasures of sense, and obviously Schiller's view is to all practical purposes the same. The mental enjoyment of the artist, of the scientist, will be unimpaired so long as egotistic passions are not roused. This world of material reality is intrinsically a world of struggle, unrest, and suffering. Schiller regards as grievously mistaken the well-intentioned idealist who believes that he can ever attain a final state of perfection, that he can realize the golden age on earth. The evils of life are not unlike the giant Antæus of the Greek myth. As soon as Herakles threw

this son of Earth to the ground he rose stronger than before, because at each contact he received new strength from his mother. Hence it was only possible for the hero to conquer him by lifting him high in the air and keeping him at a distance from the source of his strength. Finally, Schiller believes that there is no finality to our search for truth, although the true exists and there is an obvious difference between truth and untruth. Mankind can never have the fulness of truth in such a way that it can be formulated in the shape of a dogma. Whenever man has tried to do so, he soon held an empty formula while the spirit of the truth was lost. Thus the "three words of error" to Schiller are: belief in eternal peace, in which the good would no longer have to struggle; belief in the attainment of happiness, or an earthly reward of virtue; and a consummation of man's advance in the search for truth.

The idea that the realization of truth is rather a process than a dogma—a single statement summed up in a formula—and that much depends on the way in which we search for and reach the truth, is set forth in the impressive poem "The Veiled Image at Saïs," which was suggested to Schiller by a passage in Plutarch describing the statue of Isis in the temple of Saïs which bore the inscription reminding us of the definition of the name of Yahveh in the Old Testament: "I am who was and shall be."

THE VEILED IMAGE AT SAÏS.

"A youth, athirst with hot desire for knowledge,
 To Saïs came, intent to explore the dark
 And hoarded wisdom of Egyptian priests.
 Through many a grade of mystery, hurrying on,
 Far, and more far, still pressed the inquiring soul,
 And scarce the Hierophant could cool or calm
 The studious fever of impatient toil.
 'What,' he exclaimed, 'is worth a part of Truth?
 What is my gain unless I gain the whole?
 Hath knowledge, then, a lesser or a more?
 Is this,—thy Truth,—like sensual gross enjoyment,
 A sum doled out to each in all degrees,
 Larger or smaller, multiplied or minished?
 Is not TRUTH *one* and indivisible?
 Take from the Harmony a single tone—
 A single tint take from the Iris bow,
 And lo! what once was all, is nothing—while
 Fails to the lovely whole one tint or tone!"

"Now, while they thus conversed, they stood within
 A lonely temple, circle-shaped, and still;

And, as the young man paused abrupt, his gaze
 Upon a veil'd and giant IMAGE fell:
 Amazed he turn'd unto his guide—'And what
 Beneath the veil stands shrouded yonder?'

'TRUTH.'

Answered the Priest.

'And do I, then, for Truth
 Strive, and alone? And is it now by this
 Thin ceremonial robe that Truth is hid?
 Wherefore?'

'That wherefore with the Goddess rests;
 "Till I"—thus saith the Goddess—"lift this veil,
 May it be raised by none of mortal-born!
 He who with guilty and unhallowed hand
 Too soon profanes the Holy and Forbidden—
 He," says the Goddess—

'Well?'

"HE—SHALL SEE TRUTH!"'

'A rare, strange oracle! And hast *thou* never
 Lifted the veil?'

'No! nor desired to raise!'

'What! nor desired? Were *I* shut out from Truth
 By this slight barrier'—'And Command divine,
 Broke on his speech the guide. 'Far weightier, son,
 This airy gauze than thy conjectures deem—
 Light to the touch—lead-heavy to the conscience!'

"The young man, thoughtful, turn'd him to his home,
 And the fierce fever of the Wish to Know
 Robb'd night of sleep. Upon his couch he roll'd;—
 At midnight rose resolved. Unto the shrine

"Timorously stole the involuntary step,
 And light the bound that scaled the holy wall.
 And damntless was the spring that bore within
 That circle's solemn dome the daring man.

"Now halts he where the lifeless silence sleeps
 In the embrace of mournful Solitude.
 Silence un stirred,—save by the hollow echo
 Answering his tread along mysterious vaults!
 High from the opening of the dome above,
 Came the wan shining of the silver moon.
 And, awful as some pale presiding god,
 Glistening adown the range of vaults obscure,
 In its long veil concealed the Image stood.

"With an unsteady step he onward passed,
 Already touched with violating hand
 The Holy—and recoil'd! A shudder thrilled

His limbs, fire-hot and icy-cold by turns,
 And an invisible arm did seem to pluck him
 Back from the deed.—'O miserable man!
 What would'st thou?' (Thus within the inmost heart
 Murmured the warning whisper.) 'Wilt thou dare
 The All-hallowed to profane? "May mortal-born
 (So spake the oracle) not lift the veil
 Till I myself shall raise!" Yet said it not,
 The self-same oracle—"Who lifts the veil,
 HE shall see Truth?" Behind, be what there may,
 I dare the hazard—I will lift the veil—'
 Loud rang his shouting voice—"Truth I'll behold!"
'HOLD!'

A lengthend echo, mocking, answered back!
 He spoke and raised the veil! And ask ye what
 Unto the gaze was there to him revealed?
 I know not, Pale and senseless, at the foot
 Of the dread statue of Egyptian Isis,
 The priests there found him at the dawn of day;
 But what he saw, or what did there befall,
 His lips disclosed not. Ever from his heart
 Was fled the sweet serenity of life,
 Deep anguish dug for him an early grave:
 'Woe—woe to him'—such were his warning words,
 Answering some curious and impetuous brain,
 'Woe—for she never shall delight him more!
 Woe—woe to him who treads through Guilt to TRUTH!'"

As might be expected, Schiller's view of immortality is also idealized by Greek mythology. He hated the representation of death as a skeleton with all the terrors and repulsive horrors of decay. In "The Gods of Greece" he protests against the prevalent view of death, praising the Greek conception of the genius of the inverted torch and alluding to the Thracian legend of Orpheus which had become current in classical Greece, evincing the victory of music, the ideal, over the infernal powers.

"Before the bed of death
 No ghastly specter stood:—but from the porch
 Of the lip—one kiss inhaled the breath,
 And a mute Genius gently lowered his torch.
 The judgment balance of the realms below,
 A judge, himself of mortal lineage, held;
 The very Furies, at the Thracian's woe,
 Were moved and music-spelled."

There is a connection between the living and the dead which is symbolized in plant life, and this simile is used in the New Testament by Paul (1 Cor. xv, 36) and also in the Gospel of St. John

(John xii. 24) where Jesus says: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." For this idea the author of the fourth Gospel and Paul are supposed to be indebted to Orphic mysteries. The resurrection of nature in spring symbolizes the continued soul life of man after death. This is also expressed in the great classical hymn to Demeter (or as she is called with her Latinized name, Ceres) a poem which has been retold by Schiller in his two poems "The Complaint of Ceres" and "The Eleusinian Festival." The significance of plant life is expressed as follows:⁸

"Is there naught of her—no token
And no pledge from her loved hand,
Proving love to be unbroken,
Howsoever far the land?
Can no loving bond be spread,
That will child to mother bind?
Can between the quick and dead
Hope no blest communion find?
No! not every bond is riven,
Separation not complete;
The eternal powers have given
Us a symbol language sweet.

"Spring's fair children pass away,
In the Northland's icy air;
Leaf and flower alike decay.
Leaving withered branches bare.
But I choose life's noblest glow
From Vertumnus's lavish horn;
As a gift to Styx below
Will I send the golden corn!
Sad in earth the seeds I lay
At thy heart, my child, to be
Mournful tokens which convey
My deep grief and love to thee!

"When the seasons' measured dances
Happy smiles of earth restore,
In the sun's reviving glances
What was dead will live once more!
Germs that perished to thine eyes
In the dreary lap of earth

Bloom again in gentler skies,
Brighter for the second birth!
While its roots in night repose;
Heaven will raise the stem above;
Thus the plant between them grows
Nursed by Styx's and Æther's love.

"Partly plants with Hades sleep,
Partly live in life's fair beams;
Heralds are they from the deep,
Messengers from solemn streams.
Like my child, the dismal tomb
Will them for a while retain;
But anon their tender bloom
Spring sends forth to light again,
Telling that where shadows meet,
Though so far from light above,
Hearts remain that faithful beat,
Hades doth not conquer love.

"Hail! ye children of the field,
Whom each coming year renews!
Your sweet cups shall richly yield
Heaven's purest nectar-dews.
Steeped in light's resplendent streams,
Hues that streak the Iris-bow
Deck your blossoms with the beams
Which in morning twilight glow.
Budding life of happy spring,
Yellow autumn's faded leaf,
Shall to hearts in sorrow bring
Symbols of my joy and grief."

In "The Eleusinian Festival" Schiller describes the Greek conception of human civilization as based upon a love of freedom

⁸"Complaint of Ceres." 7-11.

regulated by self-control and moral restraint. Having established agriculture and built the polity of communal life, Demeter says:

“Freedom’s love the beast inflames,
 And the God rules free in air,
 While the law of Nature tames
 Each wild lust that lingers there.
 Yet, when thus together thrown,
 Man with man must fain unite;
 And by his own worth alone
 Can he freedom gain, and might.”

We see that Schiller indeed was not merely a poet but a philosopher. His philosophy, however, agreed very little with the verbiage and cant of the schools that posed before the world as holding in their abstract philosophy the key to the explanation of the universe. Metaphysics, according to Kantian terminology, deals with purely formal notions of science, and the purely formal as Kant expresses it, is empty as such. Thus it allows us a survey over the sciences and the whole field of experience. It sums up generalizations, which, although in themselves mere tautologies, help us to arrange our scientific material in a systematic way. How ridiculous, then, is the metaphysician whose philosophy is a mere air castle and who forgets that it should serve the practical purpose of survey. Schiller satirizes wisecracks of this type in the following lines:

“How deep the world beneath me lies!
 My craft the loftiest of all
 Lifts me so high, so near the skies
 I scarce discern the people crawl.”

“Thus shouts Tom Roofer from his spire,
 Thus in his study speaks with weight
 Metaphysicus, the learned sire,
 That little man, so high, so great.

“That spire, my friend, proud and profound,
 Of what is’t built, and on what ground?
 How came you up? What more is’t worth,
 Than to look down upon the earth?”

In another poem of the same significance entitled “Philosophers,” Schiller ridicules those theorists who misunderstand the part their philosophies play in life, which is not to direct the world but to explain it. Philosophers need not worry about the universe for that will take care of itself, and until their wisdom can discover

a method of changing matters, the world will continue to run according to the old principles—it will still be swayed by hunger and love.

“To learn what gives to everything
The form which we survey,
The law by which th’Eternal King
Moves all creation’s ordered ring,
And keeps it in right sway—
Who answer gives without disguise,
He is the wisest of the wise,
The secret I’ll betray,
‘Ten is not twelve,’ I say.

“The snow is chill, the fire burns,
Men bipeds are; a fool
The sun up in the sky discerns:
This, man through sense-experience
learns
Without attending school!
But Metaphysics, I am told,
Declares that hot is never cold;
Dryness, not moist; and light
Is never dark but bright.

“Homer had writ his mighty song,
Heroes did danger scorn,
The good had done their duty, long
Before (and who shall say I’m
wrong?)
Philosophers were born!
Yet let but some great heart or
mind
Perform great deeds, some sage
will find
The reason why: He’ll show
That this thing could be so.

“Might claims its right. That’s
true always,
And weaklings strength o’erpowers.
He who cannot command obeys—
In short, there’s not too much to
praise
On this poor earth of ours.
But how things better might be
done,
If sages had this world begun,
Is plainly, you must own,
In moral systems shown.

“Man needs mankind, must be
confessed,
His labors to fulfill;
Must work, or with, or for, the rest.
‘Tis drops that swell the ocean’s
breast,
‘Tis water turns the mill.
The savage life for man unfit is,
So take a wife and live in cities,
In universities
Maxims are taught like these.

“Yet, since what grave professors
teach
The crowd is rarely knowing,
Meanwhile, old Nature looks to each,
‘Tinkers the chain, and mends the
breach,
And keeps the clockwork going.
Some day, philosophy, no doubt,
A better world will bring about.
Till then the world will move
By hunger and by love!”

SELECTIONS FROM SCHILLER’S POETRY.

My Creed.

“What my religion? I’ll tell you! There is none among all you may mention
Which I embrace.—And the cause? Truly, religion it is!”

Division of the Earth.

“‘Here, take the world!’ cried Jove from out his heaven
To mortals—‘Be you of this earth the heirs;