

WHAT AND WHY IS PARADOX?

BY JOHN WRIGHT BUCKHAM

THE makers (and unmakers) of literature, like the representatives of science—and sometimes philosophers themselves—are accustomed to use the universal concepts and forms of thought without stopping to examine them. They employ them with careless ease, hardly aware that they are using *Logic*—or abusing it—and with little consciousness either of responsibility or opportunity in connection with this ancient and essential discipline.

It would be captious to condemn this procedure. To demand that writers, in whatever field, should familiarize themselves with the principles and processes of thought before undertaking to express themselves, would be like requiring that one should learn diatetics before venturing to eat. Nevertheless, an acquaintance with the science of thought cannot be of great advantage to authorship, and a thorough knowledge of it would open up unrealized possibilities in literature—as does science in every field of practise.

The neglect of Logic on the part of Literature has been to the serious loss of both. Just as of late the more thoughtful representatives of the natural sciences have begun to examine the concepts which they have been using with so naive an assurance, so the representatives of literature might well look into the principles of Logic which they have been employing with so much of carelessness and unconcern. In this way literature might regain somewhat more of its former strength and significance.

I

The various forms of statement and the so-called “figures of speech” all call for more careful scrutiny than they have ever received. One of the most arresting and effective of these is Paradox. What is its root and warrant? Has it logical status? Or is

it a mere device for "putting across" novel but shoddy ideas? Is it a superficial device, or does it root in the very subsoil of the mind and for that reason often yield such colorful and fragrant blossoms and wholesome fruit?

Defining paradox, with Professor W. K. Stewart, as "any statement which contradicts what has been taken for granted,"¹ the problem becomes: *what is that quality in truth which permits of its expansion so as to include and transcend real, or apparent, contradiction?* In other words, how is it possible for a paradox to unite and fulfill two apparently hostile concepts? Or, to put it in another way, how can *opposites* become *apposites*?

The answer to this query may be found, I submit, in what is called the "polarity of truth." It appears in such familiar pairs of opposites as subject, object; finite, infinite; human, divine; temporal, eternal; matter, mind; freedom, determinism; the ideal and the actual.

One term of the polarity seems, at first, to deny its opposite; but upon reflection each is seen not only to require the other—so that it cannot be understood without it—but to be capable of uniting with it in a *synthesis* which embraces both in a higher unity. This polar relationship may be termed *contrapletion*—each pole being the *contraplete* (contra-opposite, *plere*, to fulfill) of the other.

Paradox, then, as a *literary* form, may be interpreted as *arising out of the attempt to express and apply the polar relationship in the realm of thought*. It is closely related, that is, to the logical process of *dialectic*. Since the relationship is in itself arresting and challenging, paradox has in it a dramatic element, often occasioning, at first, a shock of surprise or even of resentment, which, however, almost immediately disappears in convinced assent.

What is the origin and *rationale* of the polar relationship? It may be traced, I think, to a source which Plato recognized, and Kant clearly defined,—and of which all of us are more or less distinctly aware—i. e. *the dual nature of selfhood*. Here is the birth-place of paradox. We are in our very being twofold—body and soul, psycho-physical and spiritual,—and because this is our nature it emerges in all our activities and relationships and ideas. Being himself *subject-object*, man regards all things in the light of this duality. Many have been the attempts to dissolve this inherent

¹ A Study of Paradox, *The Hibbert Journal*, October, 1928.

self-dichotomy—an enterprise in which a prominent school of psychology is now strenuously engaged—but all of these efforts seem doomed to failure because constantly refuted by experience, which, in various forms, attests that the distinction of body and soul, mind and matter, nature and spirit—cannot be persistently denied or ignored.²

Our human problem (by no means merely intellectual) appears to be to bring the two elementary elements of our nature out of our environment into a vital harmony—a result which can be achieved only by moral and spiritual as well as mental activity. In this enterprise Everyman is engaged from the cradle to the grave. It is at once the major task of the individual and of society. For this purpose it is essential to clearly distinguish polarity, or contraposition, from *contradiction*, on the one hand,—in which one opposite if true eliminates the other—and on the other hand from *contrariety*, in which the opposites are inherently hostile (i. e. good and evil) and can never be harmonized. Paradox, therefore, cannot be rightly employed in either of these cases. If the attempt is made the result is a false paradox.

II

To express and emphasize this essential duality in human experience of nature and spirit and at the same time to suggest the unity which underlies and transcends it and calls for its resolution—such may be defined as the office of paradox. This accounts for its prominence in the teachings of all great moralists, notably in that of Jesus. Two of the Beatitudes, e. g., are striking paradoxes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is a Kingdom, and, Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit. Here, too, is the key to that striking saying of Jesus which goes to the heart of personality: "He that findeth his (physical) life shall lose it (the life of the spirit) and he that loseth his (physical) life shall find it (the spiritual life)."

Many mystics and poets are adepts in the use of paradox, for the reason that they perceive so clearly its spiritual significance.

² The conception of the body as "part of self," which Professor Hacking adopts in his *The Self; its Body and Freedom*—while it conserves to some extent the closeness of the relation attested by experience—fails to do justice to the value distinction involved. Whole and part, or part and part within a whole, is not adequate to express the deep-seated consciousness of the superiority of the self of the body.

One may instance Paul's "When I am weak then am I strong," or the line of Francis Thompson,

"To eat, deny thy meat."

The deeper the study of *personality* goes, the more it discovers the polarity which underlies paradox running through all the subtle and sensitive relationships and activities of personal life. Especially is this true of the relation of finite and imperfect personality to Self-subsistent and Perfect Personality, as one finds it expressed throughout the literature of religion. The inter-relationship of dependence and independence, determinism and freedom, finds striking expression, e. g., in Paul's "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." You and God; God and you—in this paradoxical cooperation lies redemption. Tennyson gives paradoxical expression to the same relationship in the moving lines,

"We feel we are nothing
For all is Thou and in Thee;
We feel we are something,
That also is from Thee;
We feel we are nothing,
But Thou wilt help us to be."

Francis Thompson's "The Kingdom of God is within You," beginning "O world invisible, we view Thee" is a succession of mystical paradoxes, growing out of the interplay of the spiritual and the natural, the divine and the human. So also is his great poem, "The Hound of Heaven."

III

Returning now to *paradox* in its more technical use in literature, it should be possible, if this is its underlying principle, to understand it somewhat better, in its differentiation from other literary forms and to further its true and more rational use.

It is manifestly as difficult to keep paradox from confusion with other *expressional* forms as to keep polarity, or contrapletion, from confusion with other *logical* forms. It should be distinguished, e. g., from *hyperbole*, which may be described as a form of statement so manifestly exaggerated as to be self-corrective,—serving thus for purposes of emphasis. If alliteration, as some one has said, is like a *sheep-bell* which serves to keep a sentence from becoming lost in the wilderness, hyperbole is a *salvo* which serves to call at-

tention to an idea and make it memorable. Jesus, as a master of figures of speech, made frequent use of hyperbole, as well as of analogue, parable and paradox. "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off . . . if thine eye . . . pluck it out." "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle . . ." Such hyperboles have been the saving of sayings which might otherwise have long since passed into oblivion.

Hyperbole, like paradox, is a favorite instrument of poet and sage, as well as of moralist. Thoreau perceived its value and used it to the full, justifying himself with the following sagacious statement: "I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundations of a true expression."³ Hyperbole often ac-

³ *The Heart of Thoreau's Journal*, p. 191.

companies paradox. The arresting sentence from Heine which Professor Stewart quotes, "Apple-tarts were then (i. e. in my boyhood) my passion; now it is love, truth, freedom—and crab-soup," is hyperbole rather than paradox, though it "produces the effect of paradox."⁴ Crab-soup is evidently introduced by the poet in

⁴ Article cited, p.

the interests of candor and "normalcy" and in order to save himself from a priggish claim to be scott free from all carnal desires. It is thus as refreshing to the mind of the reader as it was to the palate of Heine.

IV

This suggests an element often present and more than incidentally, in both paradox and hyperbole—*humor*. Humor, like beauty, is "its own excuse for being," but when united to *wisdom* it is doubly grateful and refreshing. Thoreau's writing, e. g., is full not only of wise paradox (as Stewart points out) and of hyperbole, but of the "dry" humor which cheers but does not inebriate. One may instance that fine bit of paradoxical hyperbole, "Why should I be lonely? Is not our planet in the milky way?" Volumes of dissertation as to the joy of companionship with Nature and the friendliness—vs. the distance and coldness—of the starry skies would not say as much as is encompassed within this cryptic but eloquent sentence. Happily humor has not wholly fled our glum and war-worn (when it is not superficially gay) generation. Have we not Bernard Shaw—who also knows the art of paradox? Chesterton, too, an unfallen Falstaff, not without skill in the use of

paradox, as when he remarks: "A yawn is a silent yell." Even Will Rogers knows something of the force of hyperbole, if not of paradox.

Another characteristic which often attaches to paradox, forming one of its subtle fascinations, lies in *what it leaves unsaid* and relies upon the hearer, or reader, to supply,—which, if unsupplied, leaves one either sorely mystified or quite misguided. This often calls for reading into a word a meaning, suggested by but essentially different from its accepted usage. For example, the famous motto upon the familiar trade-mark of the Aldine Press consists of a saying of the Emperor Augustus, discovered by Aldus, *Festina lente* (Hasten slowly)—which finds a happy parallel in Shakespeare's paradox, "Too swift arrives too tardy as too slow." The point of the Augustan paradox, as applied to the Printer, lies, in reading into *lente* the meaning of *deliberately* or *carefully*, suggested by *slowness* but not at all the same thing. *Diligenter* would have conveyed the meaning more accurately but would have missed the piquant contrast with *festina* which makes the paradox so appropriate a motto for a printer—especially when symbolized by the Aldine figure of the swift and sportful dolphin.

V

Being of so subtle and nimble a nature, this Ariel among literary forms, Paradox, is exposed to frequent and sorry abuse. Not every would-be sage is a Prospero in his treatment of it. Professor Stewart aptly alludes to the "grovelling paradoxes" (he might have called them Caliban paradoxes) which so frequently debase literature. There are also derisive paradoxes which defame life, and tinsel paradoxes, which glitter and coruscate but have no real worth.

Here, too, enter the dragons of sententiousness and epigramism that wait ever upon both writer and public speaker. How tempting is it for epigramist, as well as for dogmatist, to avoid the interruption and drag of *qualification*, even when simple honesty,—to say nothing of comprehensiveness, or catholicity,—demands the use of this very essential brake upon the too headlong movement of assertion or denial!

It is not always easy to detect the falsity which lies within a misconceived or misapplied paradox. The well-known lines of

Pope, quoted by Professor Stewart with quite too lenient a comment, will afford an example:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
 All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
 All discord, harmony not understood;
 All partial evil, universal good:
 And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.

This succession of plausible paradoxes at first attracts and then repels. The attraction lies in the pertinent and wholesome idea that if one could only station himself near enough to the center of existence, instead of wishing to shatter this sorry scheme of things, with Omar, and remould it nearer to the heart's desire, everything would assume for him a changed aspect; he would find direction, harmony, good, where now he sees only chance, discord and evil. Such a thought is surely worth cherishing, provided it does not blind one to present realities. But, instead of affirming that there is art running *through* Nature, and that there are signs of direction *in the midst of chance*, and harmony mastering discord—and instead of holding out the hope that all things are moving toward a worthy goal and will eventually reach it—Pope's lines declare that this ideal state of things is already here and imply that all which appears otherwise is illusion. Such an attitude flouts experience, discounts reason, and tends to paralyze all effort to make things better than they are. Especially repugnant to the moral sense, as well as to the rational intelligence, is the claim of the climactic line. "One truth is clear, whatever is, is right." Existence and rightness are not *contrapletes*; they belong to different categories and this is a false paradox. Such mistaken paradoxes do not, however discredit paradox itself but only serve to warn against its misuse.

What wealth of meaning, as well as of symmetry, what possibilities of use and abuse, lie enfolded within the narrow and cryptic confines of Paradox! Startling yet attracting, disturbing yet restoring, perplexing yet illuminating, it awakens us from our slumber in the prosaic and commonplace to the vivid contrasts and inexhaustible meanings of the Larger Reality which is about and above and within.