

**THE POET AS PHILOSOPHER: A
STUDY OF THREE
PHILOSOPHICAL POEMS. NOSCE
TEIPSUM, THE ESSAY ON MAN,
IN MEMORIAM**

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The poet as philosopher: a study of three philosophical poems. Nosce teipsum, The essay on man, In memoriam by Mabel Dodge Holmes

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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

THE POET AS PHILOSOPHER

A STUDY OF THREE PHILOSOPHICAL POEMS
NOSCE TEIPSUM : THE ESSAY ON MAN : IN MEMORIAM

BY

MABEL DODGE HOLMES

A THESIS

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN
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THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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THE POET AS PHILOSOPHER

I

One of the passions of the human mind is the passion for definition. Were it not so, the dictionary maker would not have found so large and so constantly growing a place in the sun. This, in spite of the fact that one of the discoveries of maturity is the futility of the effort to define. Like other passions mental and emotional, the definition is elusive. The mental concept, so clear while merely a concept, is a very butterfly in its power to evade the grasp. All too many words are required for the sufficient verbal analysis of an idea that, while it remains merely a visualized image, seems self-evident. The perception which flashes "upon the inward eye" becomes confused and dulled when the feeble reason attempts justly to reproduce it through the halting medium of language. Even the daily homely commonplaces refuse to be "cribb'd, cabined, or confined." The concrete fabric of wood or metal dissolves into thin air before our effort to imprison it in words. No better means exists of proving the objects of everyday life to be "such stuff as dreams are made of" than to seek to formulate their character in words. Since, then, anything made the object of definition becomes nebulous and refuses to crystallize, why not snatch at something recognizably elusive, and ask, "What is a poet?"

What, then, is a poet? The answer must be in terms of what the poet makes himself. To-day he is a maker of pictures; and the charm of a dawning English Mayday, painted in vivid primary colors, lures us with Arcite out into woodland paths where the hawthorn breaks into blossom and the "busye larke" soars into the blue. To-morrow he is a singer of songs; and we dance with Ariel, or surfeit on the food of love to Feste's music; with Heywood we borrow the birds' notes to give our love good-morrow, or with Greene and his Sèphestia we weep for the coming grief of the child who smiles upon her knee. To-day he is the stern apostle of a religion of righteousness, preaching harsh judgment against the "blind mouths" that starve "the hungry sheep"; to-morrow he is the herald of the gentler creed of truth in beauty. Now he is the epicurean cynic, bidding us live for to-day alone, gathering rosebuds while we may; again he is the seer, with vision of that

deathless something "whose dwelling is the light of setting suns." To-day he is the voice of revolt against things as they are, wailing "for the world's wrong"; to-morrow he is the voice of an unforced optimism, singing that "God's in His heaven." The poet is all these, and more than these, and none of these. Surely a definition which so refuses to be held within bounds leaves room for a poet who is a philosopher.

Of philosophy there must be much, underlying and implicit, in all poetry as in all life. But of poets who have felt their art to be a medium for presenting a connected and well formulated philosophical system there have been few. Three such, because of a common element in their theme and in their attitude thereto, can be brought into collocation. That theme, the soul of man, its nature and its immortality, is the problem with which in all ages the thinker has wrestled, ever failing to solve it, ever returning, drawn by the fascination of the unsolvable. From Job and Socrates to Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle a long road leads, marked as with milestones by man's attempts to find answers to the age-old questions, "What is man?" and "If a man die, shall he live again?" In England three at least of these milestones are the poetical philosophies, or philosophical poems, with which this discussion is concerned. He who set up the first of these, Sir John Davies, too little known as the creator of the earliest philosophical poem in modern English literature, closed Elizabeth's lyric and dramatic century with "Nosce Teipsum," a work, according to Nahum Tate, on the "origin, nature, and immortality of the soul." A century and a half later, Alexander Pope turned his gift of rhetoric and epigram to the task of versifying Bolingbroke's philosophy in "An Essay on Man." Again a century passed, and all the divers tones of Tennyson's clear harp were tuned to the theme of the deathlessness of man, in the most loved of English elegies, "In Memoriam."

There is no doubt that these poets philosophized, or that in each of the works named a system of philosophy is presented. Does that make the poet a philosopher? The great leaders of metaphysical thought have been those who have built upon a structure already begun, a new elevation; or who have themselves laid the foundation for other men to build upon; or who, as pioneers, have blazed the trail into an unbroken wilderness of abstract reasoning. Bacon, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel—these are

creators. The poet, too, is a "maker"; but is his creative power adapted to the realm of metaphysical originality? Can a poet be an original philosopher?

An answer may be arrived at by an investigation of the work of the poets who have turned their art to the use of metaphysics. From the measure of their success may be established a conclusion as to whether the poet can be as fittingly a leader in abstract thought as he is a maker of pictures, a teller of tales, a singer of songs, a voicer of emotions; or whether his philosophy is notable, not for its depth or originality, but for the grace and vividness of the image which the polished mirror of his mind reflects for us of the current thought of his time.

II

Were the poet not made of impressionable material he would be no poet. His appeal lies in his universality, in his voicing of the thoughts and emotions of all times and all classes. Were he not so sensitively keyed to the moods of men, to the temper of his time, to life around him, he would express in his verse only a personal and therefore a limited and subjective feeling or idea. It is the poet's power to focus within himself impressions from without, transmitting them through the lens of his own mind, that gives his work a claim on the world's attention. His theme, therefore, however old and however often treated, will show in his handling of it the influence not only of personal mood and temperament, but also of personal circumstances and environment, and of the spirit of the age for which he is a spokesman.

In a first casual reading of "Nosce Teipsum," "An Essay on Man," and "In Memoriam," it is easy to see that the writer's attitude to his subject was in each case colored by the exciting cause of the poem. Without falling into the fallacy that the artist's work always, and, to a large degree, only reflects the artist's life, we may yet grant that in the case of the reflective, the philosophic, or the emotional writer more than in that of the imaginative one, life and its circumstances disclose the springs of art. Could we trace the events of Shakespeare's life in the careers of Orlando, Troilus, and Hamlet, then "the less Shakespeare he"; but Goldsmith is not the less Goldsmith nor Burns the less Burns because the "Deserted Village" and "Sweet Afton" are autobiographical. As for the three poems under consideration, they are all more easily understood and more fully appreciated in the light of the circumstances of their origin.

In "Nosce Teipsum" is recorded the result of a piece of youthful extravagance on the part of the lately fledged barrister, not yet full grown into the grave statesman and lawyer so honored of King James the First.¹ During his years of law study, John Davies had counted as his "dearest friend," quoting the dedication of his poem "Orchestra,"² one Richard Martin, elsewhere char-

¹ *Complete Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. by Dr. A. B. Grosart, 1876, Vol. I, p. xxxiv.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 159.

acterized as "fast of tongue and ribald of wit."¹ The intimacy suffered the fate that often attends extravagant youthful friendships. For reasons never known to the public, Davies took grave offense at Martin, and the quarrel which ensued not only changed the course of the poet's life, but was indirectly responsible for his greatest poem. The dramatic scene when Davies, cudgel in hand, entered the dining hall of the barristers in the Middle Temple, sought out Martin sitting at table, and beat him soundly over the head, displays a most unjudicial and unphilosophic fieriness of spirit, and was not unreasonably followed by the expulsion of Davies from the Temple and his dismissal from the bar. Humiliated, he retired to Oxford.² The year which followed seems to have been a turning-point in the young man's ; life for disgrace drove him to reflection, and unhappiness to introspection. We have his own word for it:

"If ought can teach us ought, Affliction's lookes,
(Making us looke into ourselves so neere,
Teach us to know ourselves beyond all bookes,
Or all the learned Schooles that ever were.

"This mistresse lately pluckt me by the eare,
And many a golden lesson hath me taught;
Hath made my Senses quicke, and Reason cleare,
Reform'd my Will and rectifide my Thought."³

At the end of a year, the golden lessons were embodied in "Nosce Teipsum," the earliest purely philosophical poem in English literature.

It is obvious that a poem, the theme of which is the nature of the soul as revealed to the writer by the hard mistress Experience, with a view to guidance in his future conduct of life, must voice a subjective interpretation. It treats of the nature of the soul as Davies has found it out in experience, in observation, in reflection; particularly it is his own soul that is analyzed, for most of all he has learned to "know himself." The poem is a revelation of self, for the sake of those who by reading may arrive at a similar self-knowledge. Davies does not stand apart from his concept, man, and survey him with a detached and scientific scrutiny. He is a part of his own concept, and his treatment of the theme is correspondingly warm, intimate, and human. There is in "Nosce

¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. xxii.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. xxiii.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 23.

Teipsum" no egotistically elaborate or self-conscious intention to produce a philosophy. It is a philosophy, to be sure, but a philosophy that overflows in childlike naivety from within the unhappy heart of its writer. It is hard to avoid the feeling that Davies wrote the poem to comfort himself in his humiliation by an act of self-expression; as if to him, as to Wordsworth, "A timely utterance gave that thought relief."

Equally obvious is it that a poem the philosophy of which is essentially one of conduct must be primarily interested in the soul as it lives on earth, where conduct is its outer garment. Moreover, it is not the soul of man in general that is so analyzed, but a single soul, real, animate, individual. Davies' conclusions were as empirical, as full of common sense, as thoroughly based on his own observations of the things that his own soul could and did do, as were Locke's, a century later. The problems of metaphysics are everywhere subordinated to the problems of conduct, and however far afield theoretical speculation may lead the writer, he always returns in time for his application of the theory to practice. For instance, in a carefully reasoned passage on free will, the strongest argument for freedom is that without it man could not do the things right standards of conduct demand of him—

"If love be compeld and cannot chuse,
How can it gratefull or thankeworthy prove?

"Love must free-hearted be, and voluntary."¹

And a thorough analysis of the power, worth and beauty of the soul leads to the conclusion

"that God did meane
This worthy mind should worthy things imbrace;
Blot not her beauties with thy thoughts unclean,
Nor her dishonour with thy passions base."²

Of such a practical and didactic nature was necessarily the metaphysics taught as "golden lessons" in the school of experience by the mistress Affliction, with a view to reforming and rectifying the will and thought of the learner.

Quite different was the exciting cause of Pope's "Essay on Man." Here is no "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions"

¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 115.