

The Birth of the Modern Mind
by Paul Oppenheimer

The First Hundred Years, and Later Influences

The invention of the sonnet did not, of course, "create" self-consciousness. Appearing as it did at the court of Frederick II, it led to a fashion in self-conscious, silent, and meditative literature that continues into our own day. It led to a fashion in a new sort of imaginative literature as well, the literature in which concrete images would replace allegorical personifications, thereby promoting a new method of symbolism with more direct and clear connections to the subconscious. Chrétien de Troyes and the courtly love poets of Provence had similarly created a fashion for courtly love literature. But as Maurice Valency has pointed out in his study of the courtly love lyric, *In Praise of Love* (New York, 1958), courtly love poetry certainly did not create courtly love; it provided a form, and a mirror, in which to see more clearly what was probably commonplace. What now remains is some analysis of the new silent fashion.

It is surely obvious, though it needs mentioning, that the requirements of poetry meant to be set to music and sung, as opposed to poetry meant for silent reading, or reading aloud, differ so greatly as to produce, almost automatically, very different writing. Song is generally intolerant of complex imagery, though it thrives on simple plot and repetition. This is due as much to the music as to the nature of performance. Usually, in fact, two or more types of music must be absorbed at once, that of the players and voices, and that of the lyrics, with their ideas. Since sound always matters most in a musical performance—its very condition is aural—any complex images are bound to create a distraction, an imbalance between music and words, and ultimately confusion. If complex images come up in performed songs, they must probably be repeated fairly often, as in a refrain, to achieve clarity and balance

with the music. The richness of performed songs lies in the performance, not—or seldom—in the lyrics themselves.

Just the opposite is the case with the richness of imaginative poetry, or meditative lyrics meant to be read in private or at most to a few people. This is probably due as much to the handling of time as to the inward-turning nature of personal silence. In performance, time is fleeting. It passes without pause. The audience must surrender a good deal of its capacity for reflection. In privacy and silence, however, readers may grant themselves total control, stopping and starting at will, concentrating on a particular phrase, repeating their readings of hard passages, reading sections and words at random, rearranging a text in their minds, allowing associations with past experiences and other texts to suggest themselves, and more of these than could possibly be managed during a public reading or performance. The poet aware of these flexibilities, really a flexibility of time, as was Giacomo, and his successors in sonnetting, has a unique opportunity. He can focus on the particular, the unusual, the concrete, the purely intellectual, exploring implications that would bewilder an audience listening to instrumental music and singing. He can also create lengthy complex comparisons, or conceits, with twists, turns, and resolutions incomprehensible to the hurried attention of a public audience also listening to music.

Giacomo's sonnets overflow with concrete images and conceits. In sonnet IX, for instance, he compares the withering of a cut lily to his own internal "fasting" and "fading," cut off from the woman he loves. In the second quatrain, his refined love, unknown to hearts of a "weaker nature," is seen as an eagle that "swoops" and "ravages" by "nature." The theme throughout is nature, what is natural, for lilies, eagles, and the poet himself. Oddly, what is natural for him, he announces, is his self-tormenting "fate" of serving and adoring, or praising, his Lady as "best," no matter what she does. The idea that a love that ravages him has become as natural for him as it is for a lily to be joined to its stem is pursued into the sestet. Here, by implication, the poet pleads with his Lady to keep him from loving others. Were he to do so, he would become "unnatural," so he feels. She can rescue him by accepting him. His heart, he declares, can never part from her. Yet the focus is less on her acceptance than on the destructive eagle of his love,

of which he has had "knowledge" since he first glimpsed her. By implication, too, this love is a sort of "natural disease," an idea common enough among courtly love poets (Giacomo takes up this issue more explicitly in sonnet XI).

The image of glass in sonnet X is similarly complex, with its play on glass and mirrors, on the fragility of both, and on their ability—despite how easily they may be shattered—to allow sunlight to pass through them or reflect off them harmlessly. This poem is about light and love. Each is seen as a force, and alters or "defaces" whatever it pierces and wherever it "reflects." Each, therefore, in some sense causes invisible "pain." In the sestet, the ideas of light and love are combined into a new image, that of fire, the fire of two lovers, which can become "visible," so that both lovers can see it, only if they get together. The poem is less a plea for this, though, than a careful and "shrewd" image itself, of the process of falling in love, or of being pierced by intense emotional "light."

It is the concreteness and complexity of the images that is interesting here, not the images themselves, which are conventional. The novel handling of the ordinary is what matters. Giacomo manages a change both small and momentous, especially when one considers where it would lead. Any reader familiar with the poets of Provence, or with lyrics of their northern French *trouvère* imitators, will surely notice a shift in emphasis in these two sonnets, a shift away, slightly but significantly, from images vaguely suggested and then abandoned to images offered with greater physical weight, because they are more detailed, and lengthier, and because they seem to carry all by themselves the major feelings of the poems. The lily and eagle of sonnet IX and the glass and fire of sonnet X have become symbols in the modern sense of becoming gateways to internal conflicts.

At the same time—another shift in emphasis—the persona of performed songs vanishes. It is replaced by a person, or at least a totally personal note. Both issues need some explanation.

A persona is an invented being designed as a deliberate replacement for the author, or as a mask. The presence of such an invention is always indicated, either by an announcement (as at the beginning of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* or T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") or by certain

techniques, or both. Often, and especially in popular love songs, a blurring takes place, so that the song appears to be personal when in fact it is—if not personal—simply universal, sung in a way by a “personification,” the performer. This occurs because of the audience’s temptation to confuse the performer with his lyrics. The temptation is heightened if the performer is also the author of the lyrics. Nevertheless, the truly personal may be absent, as a brief reference to a more recent popular love song may easily demonstrate.

The first stanza of the popular “A Bicycle Built for Two” presents a typical performer-persona, who addresses not a specific “lady” but any lady, and more than her, any listening audience, anonymous and hopeful of success in love:

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do!
I'm half crazy over the love of you!
It won't be a stylish marriage—
We can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet
On the seat
Of a bicycle built for two.

The jollity of these lines is achieved by a stock name, catch phrases, and the form. “Daisy” is never described. The name is a typical selection from the many female names-after-flowers. It can scarcely refer to an actual person. “Half crazy,” a phrase whose sophistication and lightness result from the adverb “half,” is a watered-down nineteenth-century version of the courtly love sentiment of adoration. The lines are clearly social rather than private, with references to public acts of obeisance—mirroring the idea of service to the beloved in Provençal courtly love poetry—and public ceremonies (riding to a wedding on a bicycle built for two) and a public problem (a lack of money). Importantly, the writing itself, with its lines of varying length, shows an adaptation to a melody, or performance. The actual feelings of the lover in love with Daisy, and Daisy herself, never (one might almost whisper, Thank God) show up here. If they did, the audience might feel something other than good cheer: a gloomy sympathy.

It is precisely this performer-persona that Giacomo eliminates, with the result that the truly personal, together with its genuine

conflicts, makes an appearance. This is not to suggest that another persona, a lover-persona blended with a poet-persona, is not present in Giacomo’s sonnets, only that the performer-persona, concerned with audience reactions, music, simplicity of imagery, and generalized emotions expressed in catch phrases, has vanished.

What is the personal? Certain key points can perhaps be made about this admittedly difficult term. Clearly, it must be distinguished from the merely obscure, on the one hand, and a tormenting of language, a twisting of syntax into freakishness, on the other. Private references, to names and facts important to the poet but to no one else, cannot make for personal poetry, only for obscurity in need of explanation. A twisting of the language, or the use of jargon, amounts in the end to a mere nervous avoidance of clichés—another form of obscurity—not a confrontation with inner conflict. As a result, freakish usages and jargon can usually be reduced to what is hackneyed, when the “camouflage” is stripped away, while clichés in themselves clearly reveal nothing personal, only a desperate desire to please at any cost. This is perhaps what the critic R. P. Blackmur had in mind when he took to task much of the poetry of e. e. Cummings on the grounds that when its odd syntax and peculiar word combinations were deciphered, only quite ordinary and trite ideas remained. This may also be why *vers libre* is so difficult to write, what Robert Frost called “playing tennis without a net.” Freedom, if it is not simply an illusion, at least in its pure sense, may in most cases simply be an invitation to self-indulgence, rather than its opposite, a moving self-consciousness. There is, in the best personal poetry, a deep paradox involved, which may become visible at this point. It is that the personal, or the thrill of the mind revealed for all to see, in all of its individual intensity, may be possible only when the methods of the poetry are impersonal. The greatest intimacy may emerge from the greatest artifice and the greatest privacy, as at a secret meeting of secret lovers. Frustration, in the mind of a gifted artist, can produce revelation, but most often in a poetry that submits to the strictness of a chosen form, rather than simply to the desires and views of the poet, and which yet remains vivid and conversational language. This is not to suggest that “free verse,” or (really) irregular verse, cannot be personal, only that it probably becomes most personal at those moments when it verges on the formal or becomes regu-

lar, while still ambient with passion and life, as in the regular cadences of Whitman or Blake. In a perfectly traditional manner, a frustrated conflict between form and feeling can thus evoke a disarming openness of spirit, and personal revelation. But the revelation comes about through another sort of frustration as well, through the frustration and reconciliation of powerful contradictory passions. Here it is not a question of "she loves me, she loves me not" but of "I love her, I love her not," a taxing conflict of the poet's own desires. The personal poem, or any truly personal piece of writing, in fact may be said to begin with deep contradictions, with passions and ideas that oppose and refute each other, and that yet exist simultaneously, and with all of the frustration and growing self-awareness that accompany this familiar type of suffering, the stuff of life itself, as the poet struggles for meaning. "My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease, / Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill, / Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please"—the Shakespearean contradiction, in sonnet 147, of longing for the same "sick" love that one would wish destroyed, or of enjoying how this feverish appetite "feeds" on what increases one's despair, or "ill," is a formula for countless personal poems, or for personal honesty. Beyond this, it may be observed that any satisfying meaning for this sort of struggle must be found in the poem itself, or in the poet and his poem, not in the outside world. The poem is the locus of reconciliation of opposed passions. In successful sonnets, the reconciliation takes place in the sestet. Often the reconciliation involves a change of attitude or even character—in other words, courage—as when in his sonnet XI Giacomo looks to his "spirit" to "guide" him, because his Lady will not or cannot. The process is perhaps what Yeats was thinking of when he said that when he revised his poems he revised himself. Certainly Oedipus finds that the "fault" lies in himself, not simply in his stars. Hamlet remains as baffling and controversial as he is "true to life," becomes the most fascinating of dramatic characters, because of his contradictions: he loves and hates, he decides and hesitates, he goes mad and becomes sane, he dismisses and praises, he jeers and craves, he hopes and surrenders—and all of these at once, and while also concentrating on changing himself even as he assumes responsibility for his frightening situation of regicide. Feelings in contradiction, feelings mu-

tually exclusive yet held in a single heart, a heart that is torn as it seeks to resolve them into an elusive harmony, are what produce the amazing personal signature of the best writers.

In Giacomo's earliest sonnets, and in most of the best of his contemporaries and successors, these contradictory emotions are present, even as in most courtly love poetry they are not. Sonnet XI, for instance, paints a vivid struggle between the desires of the poet-lover to conceal and reveal his pain in love. The struggle produces a new pain, of comparison with other lovers who have no trouble hiding their "love-disease." At the same time, there is no hint that the double-pain felt by the poet-lover is to be exhibited to a public not directly concerned. There are no stock names applied to some ghostly Lady's image, no catch phrases, no performer-persona. The double-pain is instead meant to be exhibited to the form of the poem itself, and in the poem, and for the benefit of the resolution achieved in the strong, delicate sestet. Here, in a quiet whisper of joy, the poet discovers how his own spirit may shepherd him, allowing him to deserve to live among people, as he feels he "should."

A comparison with Provençal courtly love poetry reveals just the reverse of this, and nearly all the time, and illuminates the new direction that Giacomo was staking out for the sonnet. In the famous *canzone* beginning "Quant l'aura doussa s'marziis" of Cernamon, a bitter despair, striking in itself even as it is conventional, expresses perfectly the courtly love poet's practiced wooling:

Quant l'aura doussa s'marziis
e l'fuelha chai de sul verjan
e l'auzelh chanjon lor latis,
et ieu de sai sospir e chan
d'Amor que-m te lassat e pres,
qu'ieu encar no l'aic en poder.

Last qu'ieu d'Amor non ai conquis
mas las trebalhas e l'afan,
ni res tant greu no-s covertis
com so que-m plus van deziran;
ni tal enveja no-m fai res
cum fai so qu'ieu non pose aver.

(BASE MS.:C.)

[When the sweet wind goes sour
And the leaf lets go its bough,
And the birds' voices cower,
Then I know how to sing and sigh
For Love, Love's prison-power,
Power I never could beat.

My misery never savored
Any trophy of love but a blow.
There's nothing for me so ill-favored
As the woman I most crave to know.
My desire in pain never wavered
From the thing that I simply can't get.]

Cercamon's verses limn his despair with a warm, almost tropical enthusiasm. At the same time, the mood is urbane, autumnal. This careful mixture of attitudes nearly conceals the singleness of the emotion. There is only longing here, no doubt about its value or motives. The performer-persona grieves, but only as one who must "sing and sigh" with an ironic self-pity, in coincidence with the change of seasons from summer to fall. Nor should saying this diminish the beauty of the lines, or their artistic mastery, which is smoothed with an ornate and glossy loveliness of a type often found in Provençal courtly love poetry. But it does indicate a decisive limitation. A single emotion, whether of longing or despair or devotion, and no matter how powerfully expressed, cannot by itself reveal the complexities of character, or the hard battle for self-honesty. At best, single emotions create stereotypes, or former-personae, facades, often interesting, sometimes marvelous, meant to entertain and soothe. Their purpose, as is clear in many an adventure story, is to reduce the portrait of character to a silhouette, so that the focus may fall on a single type of action, on violence in the adventure story, on service in the courtly love poem. The mood is uncomplicated by questions of values. The values, between poet and audience, are understood and not to be questioned.

Giacomo's newly invented "silent" sonnets were meant to push beyond this, thereby fulfilling a tendency already apparent, to some extent in the long narratives of Chrétien de Troyes, in France, but more impressively in the Germanic poetry of the north. Some of the finest lyrics of Walther von der Vogelweide, and Wolfram's

epic *Parzival*, introduce self-conscious and meditative moments and scenes, although the more familiar performer-persona still dominates and simplifies characterization. Hints and even convictions that accepted values and views of human nature needed to be challenged, in the work of these poets, as well as in the *Tristan und Isolde* of Gottfried von Strassburg, no doubt caught the receptive ear of Frederick II on his travels through his German kingdoms. There he would certainly have heard this quite remarkable poetry, and there his courier-*notaro* Giacomo might have heard it too. The half-pagan spirit of the Germanic kingdoms remained half-defiant and questioning almost by nature, inclined to introspection. The ancient Teutonic forest gods and goddesses still called out, in folksongs and fate-governed epics such as the *Nibelungenlied*, to dark and triumphant passions in the souls of thousands of knights and their ladies, in voices full of clever magic, in the hundreds of castles linked as in a chain of civilization and soldiery from Salzburg to Aachen. Once the tendency toward meditative poetry had combined with silent literature, in Giacomo's sonnet, and once a fashion for this new type of literature had caught on at Frederick's court in Apulia, the only questions were what would be done with it and where it would lead.

It led to Dante, within a few brief decades. It led to the precise, intimate light of Dante's metaphors, earthy comparisons rendering the miraculous mundane and the mundane miraculous. It led eventually to Shakespeare. It led, still later, to Donne's beaten gold and his amazing image of a compass, whose legs, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," leaning and turning measure his heart's yearning for his wife. It led to the angelic lights of the images of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with their caressing power, the power of soft storms, burning the last dark from heaven even as they sterilize the sepulchral dust of hell, burning hell's filth clean, so that anyone can see for himself the poisonous morbidity of excess, and see it with a perfect clarity never before known. It led or contributed, in fact, to all of the splendid variety of the modern literary experience.

In Dante's *Commedia* one encounters an encyclopedia of intimacy. For the first time, the poet is himself the central figure in a major literary work, one of the most sublime in the history of written language. In his political treatise *De monarchia*, Dante had al-

ready described the goal of civilization as the perfection of the human mind. He argued that this goal was most likely to be achieved not by a politically powerful pope but by a monarch schooled in justice and devoted to reason, who would minister to the secular lives of men even as the pope ministered to their religious ones. This was the political doctrine of Frederick II. It had been set down by the emperor in a letter to the Roman cardinals in 1239, in which he spoke of God as having "placed two lights in the firmament," that of the pope and that of the monarch. Its clear influence on Dante indicates the extent to which the greatest of Italian poets had accepted Frederick's model as his ideal. More significantly, Dante's vernacular poetry, and his defense of vernacular Italian, and specifically Sicilian, literature, in his *De vulgari eloquentia* (bk. I, ch. XII), shows his indebtedness to the vernacular poetry of Frederick's courtiers and the emperor himself:

The Sicilian vernacular appears to arrogate to itself a greater renown than the others, both because whatever poetry the Italians write is called Sicilian, and because we find that very many natives of Sicily have written weighty poetry. . . . But those illustrious heroes Frederick Caesar and his happy-born son Manfred, displaying the nobility and righteousness of their character, as long as fortune remained favorable, followed what is human, disdaining what is bestial; wherefore those who were of noble heart and endowed with graces strove to attach themselves to the majesty of such great princes; so that in their time, whatever the best Italians first attempted first appeared at the court of these mighty sovereigns.⁷

Dante was to pay homage to Giacomo da Lentino in his *Purgatorio*, where he refers to Giacomo as one who, despite real achievement, did not attain to Dante's own *dolce stil nuovo* ("sweet new style"). But the greatest homage is offered by implication, in Dante's *La vita nuova*, which does not mention Giacomo. The book is Dante's love-autobiography, a series of sonnets interlaced with prose analyses of their structures and meanings. Dante here speaks of the sonnet as "showing forth my inward speech," a phrase neatly descriptive of the personal, silent quality, the meditative sweetness, of the new sort of literature.

7. *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, trans. A. G. Ferrers Howell (London, 1904), pp. 38-39.

In the *Commedia*, the grandest possible stage, a cosmic one stretching from hell to heaven, from confusion to certainty, from depravity to celestial glory, becomes the setting for personal discoveries. The daring of this is inconceivable without the groundwork of Giacomo's Sicilian sonnet. The *Commedia* is the first silent epic. In fact, it is the first major piece of silent literature in modern times. Its meditational qualities, the complexity of its conceits or comparisons, and the difficulties of its philosophical and scientific outlooks become the delicious acceptable joys of the reader who reads alone, the new reader of poetry. They are no more within the province of an audience listening to music and singing than would be the novels of Dostoevsky or Proust. This is not to say that the *Commedia* cannot be read aloud or even in part performed. But Dante's epic, written in exile, and focusing on personal-spiritual growth, and on a spiritual-intellectual vision, is designed for visionary and private readers. Erich Auerbach has pointed out how this intention meant a search for a new audience as well, an audience not necessarily of the noble classes but interested in poetry, and sharing the poet's concern with what poetry could accomplish at its imaginative and intimate best:

The apostrophes to the reader [of the *Commedia*] are almost all couched in the imperative; none contains a plea for favor or indulgence, and nowhere does Dante speak like an author who looks upon his readers as customers. When Dante expresses his hope of favor and fame, he seems to be addressing posterity; and when he confesses his insufficiency, he is not pleading for indulgence but only explaining the superhuman dimensions of his task.⁸

The performer-persona, still present in Wolfram's *Parzival*, has clearly vanished. In implying this change, Auerbach points inadvertently to yet another result of the invention of the sonnet and its influence. This is the creation of a new and specifically modern literary tradition of great importance in the history of poetry since Dante, that of writing poetry for a literary-minded audience rather than simply for "customers," or members of the aristocracy. Dante takes as his standard the finest achievements of the best poets of the past, and looks to the best poets to come, to posterity, viewing

8. Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1965), p. 301.

them as masters, who, along with like-minded readers, will fully comprehend his efforts and success. Virgil is Dante's guide through much of the *Commedia*. The most ambitious of Roman poets, the author of the *Aeneid*, referred to as a "fountain of rich speech" and as "a glory and light of other poets," whose work Dante has zealously studied, is a paragon for this audience, together with readers, of whatever background or class, or era not yet begun, who worship the perfections of poetry.

This is a very different thing from writing for the aristocratic and emotional elite, those among the nobility in Provence whom the troubadours often referred to as the "elect" because they appreciated the noblest sort of love, or *fin amour*. It is also very different from simply basing one's poetry on biblical texts alone, or earlier texts of other sorts, to conform with medieval notions of "truth," texts that seemed closer to the mind of God simply because they were old. Dante writes for what he calls the *cor gentile*, the well bred and even educated heart or spirit, of all classes. He writes nearly as much for the sake of poetry as for the sake of God. His best successors over the centuries were often to write for the sake of poetry only, or for the sake of the deepest self-contradictory emotions, or in the hope of emulating the best poets of the past, Dante among them.

In undertaking to change the very audience for poetry, and to seriously alter the nature of literary tradition, Dante seems to owe much to the invention of the sonnet. From the start, Giacomo and his contemporaries at Frederick's court had seen the sonnet as an epistolary spark for dialogue between poets, deeply conscious of the form as capable of a new literary intimacy. Giacomo exchanges sonnets, in dialogue form, with L'Abate di Tiboli. Jacopo Mostacci does the same with Pier della Vigna. Giacomo's sonnet *Amor è un desio che ven da core* (see pp. 62-63) becomes the third voice in a *tenzone*, or debate, between Mostacci and della Vigna.⁹ The practice continued and expanded among the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*. Sending sonnets back and forth, Dante participated in a new form of literary correspondence, with Brunetto Latini, Cino da Pistoia, and Guido Cavalcanti. Other poets, such

9. Impersonal varieties of the *tenzone* were known in Italy, having originated among the twelfth-century troubadour poets of Provence, who debated abstract issues in *chanson* form.

as Folgore da San Gimignano, had already extended the range of subjects that the sonnet might easily handle, beyond the familiar subject of secular love. Folgore's sequence of twelve sonnets, on the months of the year, and his sequence of seven, on the days of the week, demonstrated in splendidly developed concrete images that the personal and mediative could combine powerfully with description. A fashion for the new sort of writing was in the air, and it was a natural, if tortuous, step beyond what others were doing to Dante's *Commedia*, with its combinations of intimacy, concreteness, and the broadest possible philosophy and spiritual devotion. Equally natural, in view of the new type of poetry, was Dante's transformation of the epic form itself. Virgil may be Dante's guide and master through much of the *Commedia*, but Dante's celebration of beauty on all possible levels is not the *Aeneid*. Nor is it the *Odyssey* (Dante had read Homer in poor Latin translations). In his essay "Dante and the Marital Epic," Robert Hollander has shown how Dante adapted the themes and techniques of these classical epics to his new Christian epic, turning the struggles of heroes into the pilgrimage of an ordinary man to the sight of God.¹⁰

The spread of the sonnet into all cultures speaking Western languages over the next few centuries, its continuing vitality in the present century, its sharp alive challenge to all those in the West who imagine themselves to be poets—all these facts, despite their importance, belie and even obscure the form's real significance, which may now be clearer. As writers began to create self-conscious characters and to produce literature meant to be read in silence, many of them influenced by Giacomo indirectly, through Dante and Petrarch and Boccaccio, the roles of the sonnet and its creator were largely forgotten, if in fact they were ever solidly understood. But the miracle and the evidence of it remained. As always in the history of literature, and the history of science too, it was the miracle of a single person, a single amazing mind, deeply influenced and aided by other amazing minds, and their pains and sorrows and innovations, but achieving something fresh and reaching adventurously beyond them, through passion and a gift, on its

10. Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Dante Society of America, held at the Modern Language Association Convention in New York, December 1986.

own. Frederick's theatrical, scientific intelligence had attacked a corrupt politics and sought to overthrow an incorrect system of beliefs about the world. His courtier-*notaro* Giacomo all unwittingly helped to change how human beings were to look at themselves and express themselves, by bringing into their literature the great new facts of silence, introspection, and self-consciousness, by creating the lyric of the private soul.

II

Sonnets in the European Tradition