PASCAL THE WRITER.¹

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PASCAL, who was the inventor of the modern omnibus, anticipated also the extremely common modern habit of wearing a watch on the left wrist. He compares ‘those who judge a work by feeling rather than by some rule to those who do not possess watches in their estimate of the time. One says it has been two hours, the other says, only three quarters of an hour. I look at my watch and say to the first, you are bored, and to the other you hardly notice the time; for it has been an hour and a half, and I laugh at those who say that time is my time and that I judge its duration by fancy: they do not know that I judge time by my watch’ (5, 137).²

All the same, as Mr. Brunschvicg points out in his note on this passage, Pascal himself would insist that while precision in estimating time can be secured only by the watch, which is an invention of reason, time itself, the idea of time, is not given to us by reason but by intuition, like all the fundamental principles—categories people are nowadays apt to say—such as space or time or number or movement. All such parts of our experience we receive through what Pascal calls the heart, as in the famous saying, ‘the heart has its reasons which reason does not know.’ Reason pursues with precision and order the ideas which are supplied from elsewhere. Pascal himself is a model of the union in a writer of precision and order, the esprit de géométrie, and the delicate adjustment of words and thought to the subject, which he calls justesse.

¹ Address given at the John Rylands Library on the 15th April, 1931.
² References are to the smaller edition of the Pensées by Mr. Brunschvicg. At the same time the marginal numbers of the passage in the original edition as given by Mr. Brunschvicg are noted after his number.
It is a commonplace that he belongs to the great masters of literature; and perhaps few would quarrel with the proposition, which I venture in my ignorance of general literature, that he is the greatest master of prose since Plato. Perhaps I should say the greatest master known to me since Plato. The comparison with Plato is obvious. The earlier Provincial Letters in which the writer records his visits to the several representatives of learned doctrine, Molinist, Thomist, Jansenist, and ironically sets their answers about the question of grace in relation to the Jansenist doctrine which he represents himself, recall the delightful comedy and irony of some of Plato’s earlier dialogues, especially the Euthydemus. And then as the argument deepens and irony and playfulness are succeeded by the deadly tearing off the mask from the Jesuit books of casuistry, until at last he breaks out into direct and passionate invective, you are reminded of Plato’s passionate attacks upon democracy in the Republic, and on the Sophists there and in the more famous pictures of the Sophist in the Gorgias and the Theatetus. Plato’s passion is indeed always under control and cloaked by an even urbaner irony than Pascal possessed. And the great passages in Plato upon philosophy and love, or rather upon philosophy as the highest form of love, are not unfitting exemplars in their beauty and elevation of thought of the more impassioned passages of the Pensées, such as those which show how the wretchedness of man’s condition and his greatness in knowing his own weakness culminate in the knowledge of God as set forth in Christianity, or the sublime earlier description of the two infinites, which I shall presently quote. Both writers illustrate how hard it may be to define the limits in such exalted passages between prose and poetry, harder when we think of Plato than, as I shall try to show, when we think of Pascal.

Pascal is a great master of the natural style, and even of what is called the plain style, simple and unadorned, of which our own best example is Swift. He does not appear to have been a student of literature, except of Montaigne and except that he knew Descartes, who was one of the influences in making classical French prose, of which Pascal himself is generally acknowledged to be the consummate master. In clearness and precision he must have been helped by his studies in mathematics and physics; and he possessed by natural gift the unself-consciousness which is the prerequisite of the highest art. Whether by nature or habit, he had acquired the power of saying things in the
simplest possible manner, with exact accommodation to the needs of the subject, which is characteristic of the "universal" manner, so that his greatness as a writer is as manifest to the stranger as to his own countrymen, and no intimacy with French literature is required of me to accept the judgment upon him of an expert historian of French literature like Mr. G. Lanson. His perfection of style, though it would seem to have been spontaneous with him, was by no means without labour, witness his own famous saying about one of the 'provincials' which had been very long, that he could have made it shorter if he had had more time. And the manuscript of the *Pensées* is scored with corrections. These great artists who talk ordinary language exquisitely are not the less artists because they seem to write at ease. Yet in thinking of Pascal we can never forget that his limpid style was the work of a mind, subtle indeed and complex, but utterly sincere, and so much a creature of natural beauty as makes it difficult to speak of him in measured terms of admiration. I feel myself unequal to the task of describing him as a thinker or as a religious teacher,¹ and am limiting myself to speaking of him as a creator of great literature, which any one who fails to appreciate, because repelled perhaps by his austerity and melancholy or by the now hopeless anachronism of his theological learning, is self-condemned.

Pascal has himself in the first section of the *Pensées* given his ideas of the natural style. It partakes both of the *esprit de géométrie* and the *esprit de finesse*. The distinction is well known, but I must quote it (1, 405). 'In the one the principles are palpable, but remote from common usage; so that it is hard to turn one's head to that side, from want of habit; but however little one does so, one sees the principles in full; and one would need to have a quite perverse mind (*l'esprit faux*) to reason ill upon principles so gross that they can hardly possibly escape one. But in the *esprit de finesse* the principles are in common use and before the eyes of every one. One has not to turn one's head or do oneself violence; the only need is to have good sight, but one must have it good; for the principles are so minute (delits) and so numerous, that some of them can hardly avoid escaping one. Now the omission of a principle leads to error; thus one must have very clear sight to see all the principles involved, and, next, one must

have insight (l’esprit juste) not to reason wrongly upon known principles. Geometers who are nothing but geometers have correct minds, provided only that everything is explained to them by definitions and principles; otherwise they are perverse and unbearable, for they only keep straight and correct upon well-explained principles. And fine minds which are nothing else have not the patience to descend into the first principles of things of speculation and imagination, which they have not seen in the world and which are outside of common use.’ Pascal himself, so far as we are concerned with him here, is, as said above, a geometer in respect of his order and precision, but he is more particularly an esprit fin. ‘True eloquence,’ he says (15, 130), ‘consists in establishing a correspondence between the mind and heart of the persons to whom one is speaking on one side, and on the other the thoughts and expressions which one uses; which supposes a previous study of man’s heart in order to know the springs of its action, and to discover next the proper proportions of the discourse to be adjusted to them. We must put ourselves in the place of those who are to hear us and make a trial on our own heart of the turn we give to our discourse, to see if the one is made for the other and if we can feel sure that the hearer will be as it were compelled to surrender. We must constrain ourselves as much as possible within what is simply natural; not make big what is small, nor small what is big. It is not enough that a thing should be beautiful, it must be suitable to the subject, with nothing too much and nothing wanting.’ Or again, ‘There is a certain model of beauty and agreeableness which consists in a certain ratio between our nature, weak or strong as it may be, and the thing which pleases us’ (32, *129). He laughs at so-called ‘poetic beauty’ which decks out its object with superfluous ornaments. ‘Imagine a woman on this pattern, which consists in saying small things with big words: you will see a pretty girl covered with chains and glasses (mirrors), and will laugh at her, because you know better in what consists the agreeableness of a woman than the agreeableness of verses. But the inexpert would admire her in this array; and there are villages which would take her for the Queen’ (33, *129). Hence (29, 427) ‘when we see the natural style we are astonished and delighted; for we expected to see an author and we find a man.’ Those who speak or write thus are universal persons, the honnêtes gens: they carry no badge of poet or mathematician; these talk the language of cultivated
men. And the natural style in writing is the same. It is 'the manner of Epictetus, of Montaigne, and of Salomon de Tultie' [that is the supposed author of the Provincial Letters] (18, *443).

The inimitable ease and force and urbanity of the Provincial letters I cannot find short passages to illustrate by. With the Pensées the difficulty is the opposite. I read a few passages almost at random:

On Diversion (139, 133). How is it that this man who lost a few months ago his only son and who, overwhelmed with lawsuits and quarrels, was this morning so disturbed, thinks of it no more now? Be not astonished; he is entirely occupied in watching where the boar will pass, which the dogs have been pursuing with such ardour these six hours. Nothing more is needed. However full a man be of sorrow, if you can prevail upon him to enter into some amusement, he is happy for that time; and a man, however happy he may be, if he is not distracted and occupied by some passion or diversion which prevents ennui from extending, will soon be sore and unhappy. Without distraction there is no joy, with it there is no sorrow (217). And it is this which constitutes the happiness of persons of great condition, that they have a number of persons to amuse them, and that they can maintain themselves in this state.

Or this, which calls up to mind a celebrated passage of Newman's Apologia:

(693, 1). Seeing the blindness and wretchedness of man, beholding all the universe dumb, and man without light, left to himself, and as it were astray in this corner of the universe, without knowing who has set him there, what he is come there to do, and what will become of him when he dies without the capacity of any knowledge, I fall into terror as a man who should have been carried asleep into a desert and terrible island and should wake up without knowing where he is and without means of going away. And thereupon I wonder how one does not fall into despair at so wretched an estate. I see others near me of like nature; I ask them if they are better furnished with knowledge than I; they say no; and thereupon these wretched strays look around them and seeing some amusing objects give themselves up and attach themselves to these. For myself, I can make no such attachment, and considering how much more probable it is that there is something else than what I see, I have enquired whether this God would not have left some sign of himself.

I see many religions contrary to each other and consequently all false except one. Each claims its own authority for belief and threatens unbelievers. I do not believe them in this. Any one may say so, any one may call himself prophet. But I see the Christian religion in which there are actual prophecies, and this is not a thing that any one can do.
I love poverty, because He loved it. I love money because it gives the means of helping the wretched. I keep faith with every one, I do not return evil to those who do me evil; but I desire for them a condition like my own, receiving from men neither good nor evil. I endeavour to be just, true, sincere and faithful to all; and I have an affection for those to whom God has united me more nearly; and whether I am alone or in sight of men I have before me in all my actions the sight of God, who will judge them, and to whom I have consecrated them all.

Such are my feelings, and all the days of my life I bless my Redeemer who has implanted them in me, and who out of a man full of weakness and wretchedness, of concupiscence, pride and ambition, has made a man exempt from all these evils by the power of his grace, to which all the praise of it is owing, for I have from myself nothing but wretchedness and error.

The general rhythm of Pascal's style is long and continuous, but it is diversified by pithy sentences of wit or passion. Sometimes they light up the sombre atmosphere of the Pensées with blinding flashes. 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me' (206, Copie 101); 'gloire et rebut de l'univers' (pride and refuse of the universe) which should be read in its context; 'Judge of all things, imbecile earthworm; depositary of truth, sewer of uncertainty and error; pride and refuse of the universe.' These sayings have a lyric cry, and we may add to them the famous 'Be comforted, you would not seek me if you had not already found me' (553, 89). There is the terrible 'naturally that will bring you faith and stupefy you (cela vous fera croire et vous abétira)' about following the practices of religion—masses and holy water, after accepting the argument of the wager (233, 3). There are others less charged with emotion but heavy with thought. Such are 'Man is but a reed, the weakest in nature; but a thinking reed,' where again the whole context is needed for the effect. It goes on: 'It needs not that the whole universe be in arms to crush him; a vapour, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But though the universe should crush him, man would be still more noble than his slayer, for he knows that he dies, and as for the advantage which the universe has over him, the universe knows nothing of it' (347, 63). Other passages have by their felicity or profundity become so familiar that we forget their origin: 'if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have been different' (162, 487); 'Truth this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side' (294, 23)—on the relativity of human justice.
Some of these passages illustrate the two salient features of Pascal's mind as it is expressed in the *Pensées*: his scepticism or Pyrrhonism as a thinker, and his religious fervour which resolves the perplexity and doubt into which he is thrown by his contemplation of the misery and the greatness of man. But I am not concerned with the substance of Pascal but with his style. It is the plain or natural style, but full of imagination and vivid in its presentation of things. If any one fancies that the plain style does not admit imagination, he need only remember the charm of Berkeley (whom, by the way, Mr. Saintsbury takes to be the chief of our prose writers in English), or that Swift on occasion is both pictorial and eloquent. I will read two passages of Swift to point this statement. The first is a famous piece in *Gulliver* (p. 1571), the second one from the *Tale of a Tub* (p. 61).

For I remember very well, in a discourse one day with the king, when I happened to say there were several thousand books among us written upon the art of self-government, it gave him (directly contrary to my intention) a very mean opinion of our understandings. He professed both to abominate and despise all mystery, refinement, and intrigue, whether in a prince or a minister. He could not tell what I meant by secrets of state, where an enemy, or some rival nation, were not in the case. He confined the knowledge of governing within very narrow bounds, to common sense and reason, to justice and lenity, to the speedy determination of civil and criminal causes; with some other obvious topics, which are not worth considering. And he gave it for his opinion, that whoever could make two ears of corn, or blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together.

The worshippers of this deity had also a system of their belief, which seemed to turn upon the following fundamentals. They held the universe to be a large suit of clothes, which invests everything: that the earth is invested by the air; the air is invested by the stars; and the stars are invested by the *primum mobile*. Look on this globe of earth, you will find it to be a very complete and fashionable dress. What is that which some call land, but a fine coat faced with green?, or the sea, but a waistcoat of water tabby? Proceed to the particular works of the creation, you will find how curious journeyman Nature has been to trim up the vegetable beaux; observe how sparkish a periwig adorns the head of a beech, and what a fine doublet of white satin is worn by the birch. To conclude from all, what is man himself but a micro-coat, or rather a complete suit of clothes with all its trimmings? as to his body there can be no dispute; but examine even the acquirements of his mind, you will find them all contribute in their order towards furnishing out an exact dress: to instance no more; is not religion a cloak, honesty a pair of
shoes worn out in the dirt, self-love a surtout, vanity a shirt, and conscience a pair of breeches, which though a cover for lewdness as well as for nastiness, is easily slipt down for the service of both?

They are both full of satire in their several ways, but they serve to show how the plain style can vary even in a man like Swift who does not rank especially among the poets. But Pascal's writing is of a higher order, if only because he had the exaltation which Swift lacked. I will quote part of the passage on the two infinites:—

This is where natural knowledge leads us. If it is not true, there is no truth in man; if it is true, he has in it a great ground of humiliation, compelled as he is in one or other manner to feel his abasement. And he cannot live without believing it. I wish before he enters into larger inquiries into nature that he should for once consider nature seriously and at leisure, that he should also see himself and knowing what proportion he bears . . . Let him then contemplate all nature in her full and exalted majesty, removing his eyes from the mean objects which surround him. Let him regard this brilliant light, set like an eternal lamp to illumine the universe; let him see the earth as a point in comparison of the vast orbit which this star describes, and think with astonishment that this orbit is but a very delicate point compared with that which the stars that roll in the firmament comprehend. But if our sight stop there, let imagination go out beyond; it will rather weary in conceiving than nature in supplying. All this visible world is but an imperceptible spot in the ample bosom of nature. No idea approaches it. In vain we make big our conceptions till they reach beyond imaginable spaces, we do but produce atoms in comparison of the reality of things. It is a sphere whose centre is everywhere, whose circumference nowhere. And it is the greatest sensible mark of the omnipotence of God that our imagination is lost in this thought.

Let man return to himself and consider what he is in proportion of existence; regard himself as strayed into this remote corner of nature; and from this little hiding-place where he lurks (I think of the universe) let him learn to judge the earth, the kingdoms, the towns and himself at their just measure.

What is a man in the infinite?

But, that he may be aware of another prodigy as astounding, let him inquire into the most delicate things in what he knows. A mite will offer him in its small body parts infinitely smaller, limbs with joints, veins in its limbs, blood in its veins, humours in this blood, drops in these humours, vapours in these drops; let him divide up these last things again and exhaust his powers in such conceptions until the last object he can reach becomes the object we are speaking of; he will think perhaps that he has reached the extremest minuteness in nature. I will make him see therein a new abyss; I will paint for him within the circuit of this tiny atom not only the visible universe, but the immensity of what we can conceive in nature. He shall see therein an infinity of universes, each of which has
its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportion as the visible world: in that earth animals and mites in which he shall find once more what the first mites offered; and finding again in the others the same thing without end and without rest, he shall be lost in these wonders as astounding in their smallness as the former ones by their largeness; for who would not wonder if our body which before was almost not perceptible in the universe, imperceptible indeed in the bosom of the whole, should be now a colossus, a world or rather a whole, in comparison of the nothing which he fails to reach.

He who shall consider himself in this fashion will be terrified at himself, and, considering himself poised, in the mass nature has given him, between these two abysses of infinity and nothing, he will quail in view of these wonders; and I think that his curiosity changing into astonishment, he will be rather disposed to contemplate them in silence than search them out with presumption.

For indeed what is man in nature? A nothing in respect of the infinite, a whole in regard of the nothing, a mean between nothing and the whole. Infinitely far from comprehending the extremes, the purpose and the principle of things are shrouded for him in an impenetrable secrecy, incapable as he is of seeing either the nothing from which he proceeds or the infinite in which he is engulfed.

What will he do then except apprehend some appearance and mean of things, in an eternal despair of knowing either their principle or their end? All things come from the nothing and are borne on to the infinite. Who shall follow these astounding steps? The author of these wonders comprehends them. None other can. (72, 347).

Many would be inclined to say that this wonderful writing is, in spite of its prose form, poetry and the prose writing of a poet. And to two at least of the famous sentences I quoted before, ‘Le silence etc.’ and ‘Console toi, etc.’ it is difficult to deny the character of poetry. A French friend of my own, and a distinguished writer, declared to me that Pascal was not only the greatest French writer of prose, but the greatest French poet; and I imagined at first that he might be using poetry as the name of all literary art, I mean writing which is not mere craft as most prose and much verse is, but in the strict sense art, and not merely skilful but beautiful.

But I understand that this is not ordinary French usage, as the word ‘Dichter’ is used in German for any imaginative writer; and the proposition is staggering to one who thinks of Shakespeare as a supreme poet and Swift as a supreme prose writer. At any rate it is worth while, I think, to raise in respect of Pascal the old question of the difference between prose and poetry, for I shall plead that Pascal is not a poet, nor the great piece I have quoted the prose writing of
a really poetic nature. I do not mean merely that he does not write the hybrid thing called poetic prose or prose-poetry. Pascal himself would have scorned such an imputation—that it could be said of him what he quotes from Petronius (29, 427) *plus poetice quam humane locutus es* (‘you have spoken rather as a poet than a man’). What I mean is that for all the glory which imagination and vividness may throw over his words, he remains what he claims to be. The passage does indeed come very near to poetry. But Plato, who is a far more imaginative writer, comes even nearer to poetry than Pascal and yet he writes prose. In reading the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, one asks if these speeches about love and philosophy are not really poetry written without metre and in the form of prose; and one has to recall that sometimes Plato is parodying Agathon and Aristophanes, who were poets. But Plato, as it happens, did write poems, and to be convinced that we are reading prose and not poetry in these two dialogues we need only compare them with the two famous epigrams which have come down to us as being from him (at any rate they are worthy of so great a man).

Once you shone among the living as the star of dawn, now that you are gone you shine among the dead as the evening star.

You gaze at the stars, my star; I would that I might become the heaven, to look at you with many eyes.

Could anyone doubt that this imperfect English is not prose but a translation of a poem, itself of Wordsworthian simplicity of diction, into the mere form of prose and not into the diction of prose; any more than he can feel the same doubt about passages in the Bible like “By the rivers of Babylon, etc.”?

Contrast, before I pass on, the Pascal passage with Hamlet’s famous lyrical outburst whose topic is almost precisely the same as that of the first paragraph quoted above:—

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave overhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the
world! the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so (Hamlet, II., Sc. ii).

That is the work of a man who is a poet, and it is, I suppose, poetry, and if we ask why it is written in prose, the answer is (I borrow the observation) that Hamlet is playing a part to deceive his interlocutors. The speech is lyrical, but it is in prose form to suit the rest of the conversation. On the other hand, there would be no doubt that Pascal's lovely confession in the passage 550 quoted on page 322 is lovely prose but not lyrical, rather a statement of his feelings made for instruction of his reader.

I know that the difference of prose and poetry is almost insoluble in its difficulty. It might seem easiest to follow the Maitre de Philosophie in the Bourgeois Gentilhomme and say that 'What is not prose is verse and what is not verse is prose'—a mere difference in the form, metrical or unmetrical. But the answer is too easy. For in the first place there is the difference of diction, and Coleridge showed conclusively that even Wordsworth's diction, which Wordsworth took to be the diction of ordinary life and prose, is not really so, though it is true that sometimes in ordinary life men talk poetry because, as will be suggested later, they are not describing or expounding but are themselves, and talk as the bird sings out of the fullness of their life and passion, are in a word dramatic or lyrical. And in the second place the question still remains, what is it that makes one man adopt the form of prose and another that of poetry? Some have said, like Mr. H. Read, that the difference is one of quality, and I believe that this is true. But it does not follow that, as he thinks, it is indescribable, or that it cannot at least be brought home to the mind by attempts, however imperfect, at analysis, or at the worst, setting it in its due relation with other things.

It may be described, as some have thought, as a difference of purpose. The first virtue of prose, Sir A. Quiller-Couch says in the preface of his Oxford Book of English Prose, is persuasion; whether his description of the first virtue of poetry, as a high-compelling emotion, which he substitutes for Clutton-Brock's word love, is right or not is open to question, as indeed the whole place of the element of emotion in the arts is obscure. We may say, perhaps, that the prose writer explains, and the poet sings, as it were, to relieve his
soul. Perhaps these statements are true, and they are certainly helpful. But we should prefer to know what prose and poetry are rather than the differing motives of them, or what follows from their different natures. Now it is useful, I believe, to start from the vividness or imaginativeness which makes many think that highly imaginative prose is poetry, and to distinguish between the two in this very respect of vividness and imaginativeness. The prose writer may use all his arts to bring his subject before the reader's mind; but it is one thing to exhibit a topic vividly to the mind so that the mind cannot help seeing it and believing it; it is another thing to put the reader's mind actually into the reality he is describing, and that is what the poet does. The subject is not merely brought before the mind, but the mind is made to live in it, because the subject, whether a human being or daffodils or a flock of sheep that leisurely pass by one after one, or a battle, or Melrose Abbey, are depicted in their reality, as they live their own lives or live in themselves. The poet shares the life of what he describes and he communicates to us the life which he himself has shared.

In other words, for the statement is but a technical repetition, prose is analytical and gives a picture of what is described. Poetry is synthetical or if you prefer intuitive; or better still it is concrete: it sees into the life of things, to borrow a famous phrase of Wordsworth. The objects of poetry are things as they exist, whether they are living things and live, or inanimate things which fulfil their destiny. You are not merely looking on at them, and seeing them clearly in consequence of the writer's skill; they are dramatic and you live in their lives. Poetry creates a world and prose describes it. The differing purposes of the two follow from these essential characters. Prose persuade and instructs; poetry is its own end and aim, it creates its object and has no thought of anything else. The varying choice of subjects and method of handling them are one alike with the purpose of the two and the motives from which they arise. Poetry has no aim beyond its own satisfaction, prose aims to enlighten.

Perhaps, however, we should rather say that the difference is relative and that in proportion as literature (for it is only literary art of which I speak) attains concreteness and the self-contained unity of concrete things it is poetic, and in proportion as it is content to analyse it is prose. The concreteness of poetry explains too why the poet
needs for his expression (and he is not a poet without expression in words) greater resources of technique in comparison with prose: for metre and rhyme are, as Coleridge showed, means whereby the unity is secured in the object to which the poet gives life or depicts in its actual life; and poetic diction, in so far as it is genuine and not artificial, has the property of other magic that it helps to make real the world of things which the poet fashions to his own desires and makes us in turn desire.

The most satisfactory way to test these or any other suggestions of the kind is to set side by side with each other passages of acknowledged poetry and acknowledged prose whose subject matter is roughly identical, and note the difference of treatment of diction and how even the subject is altered in the two cases. I cannot do so here, but I propose to confirm my judgment of Pascal by contrasting with the Pensées, which so often approaches to poetry but remains prose, Robert Bridges' Testament of Beauty which so often approaches prose and sometimes actually falls into versified prose and yet is throughout poetry. I do not ask whether it belongs to great poetry, it is too near ourselves to judge its place as yet. I should not dare myself to value it so highly as some have done; nor should I think it for a moment as great in poetry as Pascal’s work in prose, for I remark that though poetry is a higher literature than prose, much poetry is inferior in greatness to much prose. But it is beautiful beyond question, and what is most to my purpose, though its subject is explicitly a philosophy, like the poem of Lucretius to which it is most easily comparable, and at the first blush recalcitrant to poetic treatment, it is beyond question poetry; and my object is to ask why; or rather to ask whether it conforms to the test which I have suggested.

Bridges’ poem is long and it is didactic, and both these characters make the judgment of it difficult. A long poem cannot sustain itself always on the higher level. Inevitably it drops into mere verse. If this is true of the Prelude it is much more true of the Testament of Beauty, and it would be quite easy to quote passages of mere prose, passages, I mean, which except for the metre are indistinguishable from prose, especially in the fourth Book, where the poetic inspiration flags in comparison with the other three parts. I will quote one such passage merely for verification (III, 151).
Yet our distinction is proper and holdeth fast. Now BREED is to the race as SELFHOOD to the individual; and these two prime instincts as they differ in purpose are independent each from other, and separate as are the organic tracts in the animal body whereby they function; and tho' Breed is needful alike to plants as to animals, yet its apparatus is found in animals of a more special kind, and since race-propagation might have been assured without differentiation of sex, we are left to guess nature's intention from its full effects in man: and such matter is the first that will follow hereon.

(Ill, 151-162.)

I cite this merely, as I said, for verification of my statement, not for reproach. A long poem must be taken as a whole if we ask whether it is truly poetical: we judge by the unity and spirit of the whole. For a different reason we dare not judge by thinking only of the special passages of lyrical beauty, which abound in this poem as they abound in Lucretius. Even Bridges himself, somewhat unfairly I must think, seems to suggest that he cared for Lucretius not as the poet of the atomic theory of Epicurus but as the author of the glorious invocation to Venus and we might add of those other passages in which he rises to the height of the greatest poetry, like the picture of the cow whose calf has been taken from her for the sacrifice or that in which he deprecates the fear of death. It is neither by more obvious poetical triumph of selected parts, nor the obvious poetical falling short of other selected parts that the poem produces its effect.

So much for its length. As to the drawbacks which are supposed to arise from its philosophic character, fortunately I need not speak for myself. I have only to borrow the words of Mr. Santayana's study of Lucretius and of Dante in his Three Philosophical Poets (Harvard, 1910). Of Lucretius he writes (p. 34):—

There remains the genius of the poet himself. The greatest thing about this genius is its power of losing itself in its object, its impersonality. We seem to be reading not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves. That things have their poetry, not because of what we make them symbols of, but because of their own movement and life, is what Lucretius proves once for all to mankind.

In urging that the poet brings things before us in their own movement and life I have been saying for myself what Mr. Santayana has said so much better years ago.
Of the fitness of a philosophical or a scientific theory to be poetry he writes in a passage not every word of which I should accept (p. 124) :

The life of theory is not less human or less emotional than the life of sense; it is more typically human and more keenly emotional. Philosophy is a more intense sort of experience than common life is, just as pure and subtle music, heard in retirement, is something keener and more intense than the howling of storms or the rumble of cities. For this reason philosophy, when a poet is not mindless, enters inevitably into his poetry, since it has entered into his life; or rather, the detail of things and the detail of ideas pass equally into his verse, when both alike lie in the path that has led him to his ideal. To object to theory in poetry would be like objecting to words there; for words, too, are symbols without the sensuous character of the things they stand for; and yet it is only by the net of new connections which words throw over things in recalling them, that poetry arises at all. Poetry is an attenuation, a rehandling, an echo of crude experience; it is itself a theoretic vision of things at arm's length.

and again on p. 123, speaking of Dante's learning, he writes :—

Such a constant dragging in of astronomical lore may seem to us puerile or pedantic; but for Dante the astronomical situation had the charm of a landscape, literally full of the most wonderful lights and shadows; and it also had the charm of a hardwon discovery that unveiled the secrets of nature. To think straight, to see things as they are, or as they might naturally be, interested him more than to fancy things impossible; and in this he shows, not want of imagination, but true imaginative power and imaginative maturity. It is those of us who are too feeble to conceive and master the real world, too cowardly to face it, that run away from it to those cheap fictions that alone seem to us fine enough for poetry or for religion.

Now that I have, as I hope, removed these prima facie difficulties which arise from prejudice, all that remains for me to do is to read a few passages from the poem itself. Two things there are to note about them. The first is the singular power of the metre, these 'loose Alexandrines,' in securing unification of the picture. Lucretian hexameters read to me, who am no Latinist, rapider than Virgilian and carry you on on the tide of this movement and life of the atoms. These Alexandrines of Bridges are more effective still, and sweep you on through his moralities and reflections and scientific expositions until you cannot help feeling the life and movement of these things, to less reflective minds so arid. This is why I commented on Bridges’ apparent ingratitude in speaking of Lucretius. For Lucretius’ atoms seem to me more interesting and alive than Bridges’ own severe ex-
positions of nature and man. And merely to gratify myself I recall how Lucretius in one place fancies the atoms listening to a certain theory and says they would bedew their cheeks with laughter over it (I, vv. 19, 20). Could anyone have said so in prose? But for the poet the atoms are concrete and he shares their movement and life.

With this almost willful parenthetical remark I have been leaving the matter of Bridges' workmanship, all important as it is for the artist, and have encroached upon the subject which concerns me most, which I am the most anxious that you should verify, the feature which distinguishes him as a poet and for all the closeness of his subject to a prose treatment, his concreteness by which his subject is not presented merely to our eyes but is enacted in itself; by which 'selfhood' and 'breed' and morals become for us a new world of living history. Doubtless such concrete vision is a reflection of the poet himself; the secret of a poem, he says (IV., 992), 'lieth in this intimat echo of the poet's life.' The question to be answered is whether this concreteness is there and whether it is not this which makes the poetic vision.

I will quote two passages which occur at the very beginning I., 8-36 and 72-85 and two others from Book II.

'Twas late in my long journey, when I had clomb to where the path was narrowing and the company few, a glow of childlike wonder enthral'd me, as if my sense had come to a new birth purified, my mind enrapt reawakening to a fresh imitation of life; with like surprise of joy as any man may know who rambling wide hath turned, resting on some hill-top to view the plain he has left, and seeth it now out-spread mapp'd at his feet, a landscape so by beauty estranged he scarce will ken familiar haunts, nor his own home, maybe, where far it lieth, small as a faded thought.

Or as I well remember one highday in June bright on the seaward South-downs, where I had come afar on a wild garden planted years agoe, and fenced thickly within live-beechen walls: the season it was of prodigal gay blossom, and man's skill had made a fair-order'd husbandry of that nativ pleasance: But had there been no more than earth's wild loveliness, the blue sky and soft air and the unmown flowerspreat lawns, I would have lain me down and longed, as I then did,

1 Fiet uti risu tremulo concussa cachinnent et lacrinis salsis umectent ora genasque.
to lie there ever indolently undisturb'd and watch
the common flowers that starr'd the fine grass of the wold,
waving in gay display their gold-heads to the sun,
each telling of its own inconscient happiness,
each type a faultless essence of God's will, such gems
as magic master-minds in painting or music
threw aside once for man's regard or disregard,
things supreme in themselves, eternal, unnumber'd
in the unexplored necessities of Life and Love.

Hast thou then thought that all this ravishing music,
that stirreth so thy heart, making thee dream of things
illimitable, unsearchable and of heavenly import,
is but a light disturbance of the atoms of air,
whose jostling ripples, gather'd within the ear, are tuned
to resonant scale, and thence by the enthron'd mind received
on the spiral stairway of her audience chamber
as heralds of high spiritual significance?
and that without thine ear, sound would hav no report,
Nature hav no music; nor would ther be for thee
any better melody in the April woods at dawn
than what an old stone-deaf labourer, lying awake
o'night in his comfortless attic, might perchance
be aware of, when the rats run amok in his thatch?

But heav'nward tho' the chariot be already mounted,
'tis Faith alone can keep the charioteer in heart—
Nay, be he but irresolute the steeds will rebel,
and if he looketh earthward they will follow his gaze;
and ever as to earth he neareth, and vision cleareth
of all that he feareth, and the enemy appeareth
waving triumphant banners on the strongholds of ill,
his mirroring mind will tarnish, and mortal despair
possess his soul: then surely Nature hath no night
dark as that black darkness that can be felt: no storm
blind as the fury of Man's self-destructiv passions,
no pestilence so poisonous as his hideous sins.

For I think not of Reason as men thought of Adam,
created fullrown, perfect in the image of God;
But as a helpless nursling of animal mind,
as a boy with his mother, unto whom he oweth
more than he ever kenneth or stayeth to think, language,
knowledge, grace, love and those ideal aims whereby
his manly intelligence cometh to walk alone.

The fuller verification I must leave to the reader. But for my
own selfish delight I must quote one of the greater and more lyrical
passages. They are not necessarily more poetical, for when the poet
is describing like Lucretius the inner life of the atoms or like Bridges the inner life of man, he is mastering material of greater difficulty than when he can surrender himself to sensible or let us say sensual pleasures (Keats speaks of the sensual ear, without reproach). I quote it because in such a passage the poet’s characteristic virtue is more palpable and such passages might stand alone. The passage I choose is the one about the scents of flowers, towards the end.

The repudiation of pleasure is a reason’d folly of imperfection. Ther is no motov can rebate or decompose the intrinsic joy of activ life, whereon all function whatsoever in man is based. Consider how this mortal sensibility hath a wide jurisdiction of range in all degrees, from mountainous gravity to imperceptible faintest tenuities:—The imponderable fragrance of my window-jasmin, that from her starry cup of redstemm’d ivory invadeth my being, as she floateth it forth, and wantoning unabashed asserteth her idea in the omnipotent blaze of the tormented sun-ball, checquering the gray wall with shadow-tracery of her shapely fronds; this frail unique spice of perfumery, in which she holdeth monopoly by royal licence of Nature, is but one of a thousand angelic species, original beauties that win conscience in man:

a like marvel hangeth o’er the rose-bed, and where the honeysuckle escapeth in serpentine sprays from its dark-cloistered chamber thru’ the old holly-bush, spreading its joybunches to finger at the sky in revel above rivalry. Legion is their name; Lily-of-the-vale, Violet, Verbena, Mignonette, Hyacinth, Heliotrope, Sweet-briar, Pinks and Pear, Lilac and Wallflower, or such white and purple blooms that sleep i’ the sun, and their heavy perfumes withhold to mingle their heart’s incense with the wonder-dreams, love-laden prayers and revereries that steal forth from earth, under the dome of night: and tho’ these blossomy breaths, that hav presumed the title of their gay genitors, enter but singly into our neighboring sense, that hath no panorama, yet the mind’s eye is not blind unto their multitudinous presences; I know that if odour were visible as color is, I’d see the summer garden aureoled in rainbow clouds, with such warfare of hues as a painter might choose to show his sunset sky or a forest aflame; while o’er the country-side the wide clover-pastures
and the beanfields of June would wear a mantle, thick
as when in late October, at the drooping of day
the dark grey mist arising blotteth out the land
with ghostly shroud. Now these and such-like influences
of tender specialty must not—so fine they be—
fall in neglect and all their loveliness be lost,
being to the soul deep springs of happiness, and full
of lovingkindness to the natural man, who is apt
kindly to judge of good by comfortable effect. (IV, 459-506.)

I have said nothing about special features of the workmanship of
the poem such as the Miltonic revelling in proper names. These are
matters which concern the literary critic; my concern is not with
them, even if I had the competence; I am concerned with the one
point. Admitting that a poem and its workmanship are one thing
and one thing only, and that a poet without words, and melodious
words, is nothing, we may still ask whether there is not such a differ-
ence in treatment and subject and its concomitant diction, which makes
one artist in words choose the form of prose and another the form of
poetry. This difference I have tried to suggest by setting the tran-
scendently beautiful prose of Pascal in contrast with the beautiful
poetry of the Testament of Beauty.

A further question is at once suggested, whether it is not likely
that this same difference verified here in Pascal and Bridges has not
its counterpart in the other arts as well. But I have already wandered
far enough away from the ostensible subject of my discourse which
was Pascal, and have made him the excuse for a more general dis-
cussion. Still it is a character of the greatest men and (Pascal belongs
to the very greatest) that they raise questions which they themselves
do not answer.