Philosophy and the Poetry of Wisdom:

The Case of Sven Krohn's *Raymundus Lullus*

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Every few years I get asked to say something about Poetry and Philosophy. And on each occasion I try to rise to the challenge in a new way. This is possible because both of the terms addressed, "Poetry" and "Philosophy", have a multiplicity of meanings and are embedded in a multiplicity of different traditions.

To follow the Greek tradition stretching back to Plato, Socrates, and their predecessors is perhaps the easiest way to get started, as this involves some acknowledgement of the etymologies from which both terms derive: "Philosophy" famously combining the Greek words for love / friendship and wisdom – φίλος (*philos*) + σοφία (*sophia*) = "a love of wisdom" – while "Poetry" – deriving from the verb ποιεῖν (*poieîn* = "to make") emphasizes the poem as an artefact, a construction, a thing made (in this case, in language).

Within such a tradition it is clear that a thing made with words does not necessarily have anything to do with either wisdom or love / friendship. The problems encounterd in what so many refer to as the "post-truth" world were therefore very much present (though, naturally enough, with markedly different inflections) in the Athens of 400 B.C. And it is, within this context, very much understandable that one of the key discussions of the relation between philosophy and poetry in the ancient world is to be found in the classic text on the State, Plato's *Republic*, especially in the final section of that work.

For here, as I am sure many of you will remember, poetry is summoned as something which does not necessarily lead citizens to truth – and therefore to wisdom – but indeed as a very powerful constructive / persuasive mechanism that might achieve the opposite result. Hence the pragmatic approach of the Sophists

to rhetoric, in which persuasion rather than truth came to the fore, undermined the whole of language as well as poetry: although it could be recalled that not all poetry needed to be expelled from the State. Indeed, in answer to this pragmatic frame of thought I remember the renaissance architect Inigo Jones once writing in the margins to his Italian edition of Plato's *Republic* that "Homer taught lawgivers". He also seems to have approvingly registered that suggestion that – although most poetry should be excluded from the Republic – some hymns and songs in praise of the State (that is to say, State propaganda) could be retained.

One problem in all of this for twenty-first century readers is that in the Athens of Socrates and Plato, poetry (as in Homeric epic) included philosophical, cosmological, scientific, historical, psychological, and sociological insights as none of these domains had been separated out from the others at the time.

And this may be one reason why even Political Philosophy could not totally banish poetry from its remit. For *sententiae*, as the Romans called them – words of wisdom, proverbial phrases and so on – had always been the stuff of philosophy, and remains so. Even when, at the end of his *Tractatus* the young Wittgenstein may have felt that he had purged philosophical logic he slips back into a cryptic language (famously satirized in Finland by M.A. Numminen) which strongly resembles that of the Pre-Socratic philosophers:

§7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Or as M.A. Numminen intoned it:

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen

* * *

There is, then, a powerful sense in which within the ancient world the poetry of wisdom is often created at what we might think of as the intersection between philosophy and poetry. In a place, that is to say, where the perceptual 'truths' voiced by poetry soak into the philosophical discourse. And as we have hinted, one place where this happens markedly (perhaps because much of what remains is in a fragmentary form) is the language of the pre-Socratics. Predicated on observations crystallized out from the natural world – such as Heraclitus' celebrated formulation *ta panta rhei* ("everything flows") – much of this is a language of experience, like proverbs distilled until they become almost cryptic or mystical in feeling. And it was towards these sorts of utterance that phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger leaned in their cogitations on Being, building in part on the poetic tradition of philosophical discourse embraced by Hegel's friend, Hölderlin, and embraced in Heidegger's own poetic experiments. Within such contexts platitudes, arbitrariness, and the pragmatic uses of persuasive language could to some extent be minimized through observational honesty and a rhetorical rigour which subordinated itself in an endeavour to communicate those perceptions rather than giving itself over to the seductions of metaphor and verbal ambiguity. But, because these qualities are endemic to any language they posed a continuing problem for philosophers, and in the middle ages the Catalan philosopher Ramón Lull went as far as to create a combinatory Art: a form of logical thinking machine in which via a series of wheels engraved with symbolic letters derived from the attributes of God ("B" representing *Bonitas* [Goodness] or "I" representing *Veritas* [Truth]) could be combined to trace a 'natural' logic (based on 'reality') which connected ideas and things from every step in the ladder of creation linking the Deity to the lowest beings.

From a more empirically-driven perspective, for philosophically-minded poets clear-sighted experience of the world was also a powerful motor: although the

poetry of experience is a hard-earned thing, as William Blake noted in his long poem *Vala or The Four Zoas*:

> What is the price of Experience? Do men buy it for a song?
> Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price
> Of all that a man hath, his house his wife, his children.
> Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,
> And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.

That this level of experiential truth could simultaneously partake of both the philosophical and the poetic is perhaps seldom manifested as clearly as it is in the life of Ramón Lull, who lived from about 1232 to 1315/16. For as well as being a philosopher, a symbolic mathematician much admired by Leibnitz, and a great-great-grandfather of computational combinatorics, Lull was also a troubadour, a poet, a beatified missionary, a mystic, and a polymath, who gave up all he had – "his house, his wife, his children" – to develop the new logic he hoped would create a common intellectual ground on which Christian, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers could meet and discuss their faiths without violence. Indeed, this (allied with his emphasis on the philosophical and poetic power of divine love) may be one of the reasons why Sven Krohn, one of Finland's major philosophers of the last century, featured him in his own philosophical poetry.

Raymundus Lullus

Appearing in Krohn's first collection, *Astronautti*, published in 1987 – a work which also has two poems on Herakleitos – the thirty-eight lines of "*Raymundus Lullus*" are sounded by three voices. First, there is a Krohnian narrator who frames the whole: setting the scene in a nine-line opening stanza and rounding off the poem in an eight-line close. And then, embedded in the twenty-one lines at the middle of the poem, Krohn has placed an imagined dialogue (supported by the

narrator) between Lull himself and an unnamed inner voice. With the help of Marita Airakorpi (who has kindly offered to read the Finnish original), I have made an English paraphrase which opens thus:

When the new day with its first rays
stirs new ideas into life
the man with the many-edged Janus face,
Raymundus Lullus tells again
the story of the Soul's road to truth
from its appearance within a strange world –
figuring it as the highest knowledge
enveloped within a cloaked image – and thereby hiding it
at the same time as he reveals it to his brothers.

Or as Krohn put it himself:

Kun uusi päivä ensi säteillään
herättää uudet aatteet elämään
mies monisärmä januskasvoinen
Raymundus Lullus kertoo uudestaan
tarinan Sielun tiestä totuuteen
havaamisesta outoon maailmaan
noin uuteen kuvavaippaan verhoten
ylimmän tiedon, noin sen kätkien
samalla paljastaen veljilleen.

What we are being presented with here is, of course, a parable: a didactic form that is equally amenable to philosophical, poetic, or biblical persuasion. (Within Finnish, we may add, this works particularly well as the etymology of road (*tie*) is also evocative of science and knowledge (*tiede* and *tieto*.) That Janus is

etymologically the keeper of the door, double-faced god of transitions (looking back to what has gone before and forward to what will become), as well as the presiding deity over war and peace also offers a cluster of associations that is going to resonate richly through the poem. And in line with Heidegger's observation in his study of the Pre-Socratics that truth ("*Aletheia*") is always in a state of semi-concealment, Krohn's narrator emphasizes the sense of estrangement and lack of recognition accorded to the Soul in a forgetful and hostile world.

Moving further into the heart of the poem, Krohn's narrator now passes the baton on to Lull himself, who describes how, in its innocence, the Soul's initial insistence on its individuality emphasizes difference rather than similarity, thereby fatally undermining its endeavour to find refuge in the world.

Thus Lullus: The Soul wanders alone,
homeless, finding peace nowhere,
drifting from dwelling to dwelling. At a closed door
it knocks and begs for mercy:
light in the darkness. "Who are you?" asks a voice,
and the Soul answers: "I, only I".
– "And who am I?" – "I am I".
From within: "Because you are you
There is no refuge for you here.
Away with you, fratricide: new Cain!"

Näin Lullus: – Sielu yksin vaeltaa
On koditon, ei mistään rauhaa saa
majasta majaan käy. Ovelle suljetulle
hän kolkuttaa ja armahdusta anoo,

valoa pimeyteen. ”Ken olet?”, ääni sanoo
ja Sielu vastaa: ”Mina, minä vain”.
– ”Ja kuka minä?” – ”Minä olen minä”.
Sisältä: ”Koska sinä olet sinä
ei täältä löydy turvapaikka sulle.
Pois velisurmaaja ja uusi Kain!”

“So in this way”, continues Lull (here, at the mid-point of the poem),

… the Soul departs for the great wars of the living,
seldom finding a dwelling on its way,
and when it knocks the answer is always the same:
nobody answers the door to it.

Niin Sielu poistuu elon suuriin sotiin
vain harvoin huomaa majan matkallaan
kun kolkuttaa on vastaus aina sama
ei hälle kukaan avaa oveaan.

At this darkest moment in Krohn’s poem, readers may almost feel as if they are languishing beneath the unforgivingly negative charge of a Kafka parable (“Before the Law” comes to mind). But Lull the mediaeval thinker seems to have another thought in mind. For as he revealed in his groundbreaking Catalan proto-novel *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved* – which is written very much in the dialogic philosophical style that Krohn is using here – that repeated grief, hardship, and affliction (rather than wealth, power, or sensual delight), are the true means of becoming at one – atoning – with the beloved (§364). And it may be for this reason that an almost alchemical transformation comes upon the Soul in Lull’s parable:

Once again, noticing the light reflecting
from the dark water of a moat
the Soul steps out before the iron door of a castle,
knocking it now with its staff,
and once again a voice asks: “Who are you, I?”
But now the Soul, schooled by so many sorrows,
answers: “Brother, I am you”.

Taas kerran valon tuikkeen heijastuvan
havaitsee vallihaudan mustaan veteen
hän astuu linnan rautaoven eteen
nyt sitä kolkuttaen sauvallaan
taas ääni kysyy: ”Kuka olet, minä?”
Mut Sielu monen murheen kasvattama
nyt vastaa: ”Veli, minä olen sinä”.

By eventually transcending, through love, by surrendering the demands of the self – by passing through Love in order to embrace the strangeness of the other as part of the search for the Beloved – Lull’s lover eventually comes to such a hard-won moment of atonement. And likewise, it is by the dissolution of selfhood that the Soul manages to reach a similar state: partaking of the spirit of universal love which enables it to become its brother.

As Krohn’s narrator puts it:

This is how Lull’s description closes:
problematic for the learned

but comprehensible to those who read it
with a humble mind, those who have known great sorrow
and travel their path with a pure mind.
For this kind of path is open to those alone,
And for those alone is there consolation.

Noin päättyy Lulluun kuvaus
jää ongelmaksi kirjanoppineille
mut ymmärtäen sitä lukevat
mieleltään nöyrät, suuret surussansa
nuo jotka toisiansa tukevat
ja käyvät puhtain tunnoin polkuansa.
Se avattu on ainoastaan heille
Vain heille siitä lohdutus.

Lohdutus. By invoking the neo-Platonic classic *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Lull's predecessor, Boethius (who argued along similar lines), Krohn is aligning his own philosophical enterprise with this poetic tradition. Nor have the issues addressed in the poem gone away. There are still as many homeless souls as ever searching for acceptance rather than rejection and hate; for doors to open instead of remaining closed and bolted; for more common-ground, more toleration, and less violence to be needed in creating the conditions for ecumenical discussions between the different faiths; and yes, even a philosophy of consolation built on love and empathy *in tandem* with analytical precision. In the end, although Boethius was executed while Lull appears to have been stoned to death, their words of wisdom have continued to inspire successive generations of poets and philosophers alike.