

THE ORTHODOX POETIC: A LITERARY CATECHISM

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The following notes are intended as occasions for dialogue, not as opinions to be merely endorsed or rejected. For anyone who may be interested in the present state of literary opinion, it can be noted here that a few theorists including Yvor Winters and Ayn Rand have been enraged by portions of this catechism; that a considerable number like Allen Tate have found themselves "nine-tenths in agreement" with it; and that others like C. S. Lewis have admitted to "sharing an intricate frontier," in their own theorizing, with the views epitomized in the pages following.

The process of knowledge at any level higher than mere data-collecting (sc. "research") is the process of dialogue. Knowledge occurs when questions are posed and answers attempted -- bad teaching (bad scholarship) being little more than any teacher's or writer's attempt to answer questions which no inquirer has yet raised. Such is the rationale, at any rate, for the brief queries and less brief replies which make up the pages following. These pages are a residue of dialogues with many students, and with at least two of the present writer's colleagues -- Professors Franklyn Nelick and Dennis Quinn, who deserve much credit for whatever value the present "catechism" may have, and no blame for its shortcomings.

The following remarks describe literature or poetry, as that art has been 1) traditionally viewed by critics and 2) perennially practised by poets. The views represented are entirely traditional; none of them are peculiar to the present writer.

A further prefatory note: Before attempting to understand the orthodox poetic, the reader should try to clear his mind of certain 19th century dichotomies which are nowhere found in the orthodox tradition. The following paired terms, although popular in modern literary theorizing, are in the traditional view useless and misleading (when employed as dichotomies) and may well be avoided: objective-subjective; man-nature; aesthetic-scientific; conscious-unconscious; emotional-intellectual; romantic-realistic; naturalistic-symbolistic; mind-matter. The orthodox poetic agrees with modern "existentialist" thought in holding that such dichotomies misrepresent reality.

Orthodox poetic?

By an orthodoxy is meant a "right opinion" -- such working opinions as have been held by the greatest artists and authors of the Western tradition. (Heterodox, it may be added, refers merely to "other opinion," not necessarily to wrong opinion; heterodox views have often in fact been experientially true in special circumstances, without attaining to any level of general truth.)

The literary critic or student, until he is familiar with orthodox views, cannot qualify even as a heretic but only as a barbarian. (A heretic is one who rejects a known doctrine; a barbarian is merely ignorant of such doctrine.)

Doctrine?

The notes below summarize the Graeco-Christian view of what is now called "literature" -- formerly

called "poetry." This is a view in which all the major authors of the Western tradition agree: Aristotle, Horace, Dante, Jonson, Dryden, Johnson, as also undoubtedly those major writers who neglected to formulate explicitly their literary opinions.

The view existed as a dominant orthodoxy until early in the 19th century, and literary works written prior to that time can best be understood by its light. To the extent that the view is simply true, it has been shared by the major modern artists and critics as one strain of the (often unformulated) philosophy underlying Western civilization.

Although the doctrine is often called in a general sense Aristotelian, it is not a view which belongs to any one philosopher except in the sense that any person can make it his own by mastering it. The orthodox poetic is not a closed "system" of thought or of "aesthetic"; it is intended simply as a view coherent with common sense, and based on the findings of common sense. ("Common sense" is defined as the natural recognition of self-evident truth.)

Where found?

Although the orthodox poetic is represented centrally by two texts -- Aristotle's Poetics and Horace's Art of Poetry -- it has always existed chiefly through the spoken not the written word, among scholars (teachers) and students. It exists in that conversation or "great dialogue" which has been carried on among educated Western men since before the time of Aristotle. Like all true scholarly knowledge, it loses much of its vitality in being reduced to print. (The notion that live knowledge can exist in books is the Erasmian or Renaissance heresy; knowledge can exist only in persons. A modern academic variation of this mistake is the notion that "scholarship" equals "publication.")

The doctrine has suffered much from the intellectual confusion of the 19th century and of merely empirical "scholarship." The student seeking the living voice of Aristotle may have difficulty hearing it in any text of the Poetics, and should probably avoid the renderings of such translators out of the 19th century as S. H. Butcher, Lane Cooper, and W. Hamilton Fyfe -- persons not competent in the philosophy of Aristotle. He should read instead some such rigorous and literal translation as that of Pitcher.

Beyond that he must enroll himself in the conversation of scholars, and practice philosophic thinking. (He should also recognize the fact that a "close analysis" of the Poetics will not assist him very much. "Close analysis of texts," in the orthodox view, is an incidental and in itself a minor part of literary criticism.)

The underlying axiom?

Art Imitates Nature. Translated: Making-things imitates things-in-process-of-change. A process imitates a process. Art is essentially a process, and secondarily a product or art-object. (The critic is often concerned with processes already completed, and tends therefore to think of art as a product.)

(Mr. C. S. Lewis, apropos of the above statement, has rightly observed that art can also imitate (represent) the supernatural or spiritual. But the axiom, in the orthodox view, still stands. Art imitates nature; the nature imitated, then, may in turn symbolize (imitate) the supernatural or spiritual. Dante first renders or imitates a rose; the rose itself then becomes the symbol of an otherwise inexpressible reality. This is a point of great importance; much of modern "symbolist" poetry represents the poets' attempts to slight or to distort nature itself, to achieve a "purity" which is not humanly attainable. Such

attempts represent, as Maritain has observed of Rimbaud's poetry, "the end of a long apostasy," rather than an essentially novel modernism. The most trivial sort of "new criticism," failing to recognize the relevance of art to nature, wastes its energies on the "ambiguities" and "ironies" of language when it could be concerned with the multiple significance of those natural realities which are represented in art.)

Art?

Art is making, or if good art is meant, right making. The word poetry derives from the Greek for to make. Law, medicine, bricklaying, teaching are arts. Art (a making) is distinct from science (a knowing), although it presupposes science in the maker (artist).

Nature?

The present world made up of things changing. The realm of becoming. Whatever is not pure spirit. The merely universal as existing below the transcendental. Nature is characterized as 1) enduring and 2) changing; both characteristics are necessary.

The term "nature" requires careful definition, so that no "spirit-nature" dichotomy is posited. Nature (becoming) is distinct from pure spirit (being), but is in no essential sense opposed to it. Rather it may be said that nature exists within the realm of supernature (spirit, being) -- much as man and art exist within the realm of nature. Nature itself is a composite of both matter and form (or spirit); i.e., it is hylemorphic.

Nature, existing within the realm of being, and hylemorphic in itself, is nevertheless separated as by an abyss from pure spirit. So far as unaided human reason reveals, the relation of nature to spirit is simply that of analogy (i.e., nature may be "like" spirit in one respect or another).

The above considerations are most important with respect to poetic theory. The popular academic idea of a "great chain of being," for instance, is unorthodox, and is irrelevant to Western poetry except with reference to a certain crude and naive deism of Pope. This is true because in the orthodox view there can be no "chain" or "link" connecting the transcendental with the merely universal. No great poet of the Western tradition ever believed in any such concept as the "great chain of being"; the relation of nature to pure spirit, in the view of every such poet, is that of analogy only.

The term "nature" in another and strict sense may mean the essence of any changing (natural) thing or things referred to.

"Nature" in its traditional signification never means either "scenery" or the mere appearance of things. "Love of nature" as meaning "love of scenery" -- the notion that trees are nicer than billboards and possibly nicer than people -- is a 19th century barbarism, the roots of which are traceable in earlier centuries.

Human nature?

Defined or described in the following ways, as that part of nature (and transcending nature) which most concerns man:

1) Greek view	2) Hebraic view	3) Christian view	4) "Modern" view
Man is a rational animal	Man is a free individual	Man is a wounded creature	Man is a sensitive animal
living by natural law	living by divine law	living by divine grace	living by social law
seeking happiness	seeking righteousness	seeking perfection	seeking security
by knowledge	by obedience	by love	by adjustment

The above descriptions are made in terms of the traditional four causes: the material, the formal, the final, and the efficient, in that order.

The Greek, Hebraic and Christian views as schematized above are not considered to be contradictory of each other; each succeeding view is seen as complementing and transcending (not contradicting or supplanting) the ones before.

The view marked "Modern" is the traditional view of man-considered only-as-one-of- the-animals. As a "modern" view, it is held by atheists, humanitarians, Freudians, Marxists, and other materialists.

The Graeco-Judaeo-Christian view of man -- the first three above, with the fourth as a co-existing subordinate view -- was held by all major poets in the Christian era until at least the 19th century.

In briefest summary: Man (human nature) is seen as a composite entity who is 1) rational and 2) sensual or sensitive.

Man, a composite being, is capable of knowing truth. Man in the orthodox view is neither merely a "thinker" nor on the other hand merely a "feeler"; he is at least potentially a knower. (Man-defined-as-thinker is a post-Descartes phenomenon.) Man's knowledge is acquired 1) through the senses, and 2) by the light of reason. All natural knowledge arrives through the senses: "Nothing exists in the intellect which was not first in the senses." The orthodox view thus is not merely a "defense of reason" -- a notion out of academic "classicism" -- but equally a defense of 1) senses and 2) reason. Both reason and senses, in man, are seen as trustworthy though fallible; i.e., true knowledge is possible.

The poet?

The maker (Greek poietes) of forms, plots, or metaphors (essentially similar things). First he sees a form in nature, and then he makes a representation of that form. By the first process he is a seer (Latin vates) and by the second a maker (Latin poeta).

As a seer, the poet can work freely to the limits of his memory, imagination, and intellect; as a maker he is limited by his technical skill, the adequacy of his tools and materials, etc. An artist of major vision (a seer or see-er) who uses words clumsily, for instance, may still be a major poet -- as Tolstoy was known to be "the worst stylist in Russia."

"Seeing" and "making" in practice are parts of one process in the artist; the poet sees as he makes, and makes as he sees. Making a poem is not only a way of making, it is a way of seeing-by-making.

Literature?

Making-with-words, a particular art. The art in this broad sense is defined in terms of the tools used in it, as the art of gunnery may be defined in terms of guns. If sufficiently well-written, a thing is often called in the above sense "literature." (Not until the 19th century did "literature" and "belles lettres" in the modern sense become standard terms. Johnson's Dictionary does not, for example, include the word "literary" at all.)

Sorts of literature?

Traditionally three: 1) "History" is any verbal presentation of unique facts, often though not always in chronological order. 2) "Science" is any schematized and theoretically stated knowledge. "History" presents particulars, "science" presents general statements. 3) "Poetry," the third sort, is the art now most often referred to as "literature."

Poetry?

Essentially metaphor, one thing seen in terms of another, and represented by means of words. A greatly extended metaphor for things-as-they-are (nature) is a fiction or story. Poetry or "literature" in the traditional sense, then, is metaphor and fiction, or in more fashionable terms "symbol" and "myth."

Strictly speaking, poetry is in its form metaphor and/or fiction.

"Poetry" as named here is not verse, nor is it a peculiar "aesthetic" feeling in the reader; nor does it matter whether it is presented as "lyric" or "novel" or "drama."

Form?

The form of a thing is its essence -- that element by virtue of which the thing is exactly what it is. The most central defining characteristic of a thing, the "what-ness" of a thing.

The accidental or merely external form of a thing is its "what-ness" in terms of elements externally observable -- for instance its "form" as a narration, or as dialogue (a "play" or "drama"), or as narration-cum-dialogue ("novel" or "short story"). Classification of literature by such "genres" or "types" is not very significant.

True form -- "internal" form -- is the plot, fable, fiction, myth, or metaphor which is essential to the artwork in question -- the one element without which the work would not maintain its identity.

It remains to be said of this "internal form" or plot -- which Dante termed the "form of the treatment" as

distinct from the "form of the treatise" -- that it cannot be described with total adequacy in any rendering; it can only be indicated, partially characterized, and otherwise approximated. This is true because "internal form" is an essence, and essences cannot be known at first hand (except in so far as essential human nature can be known at first hand and immediately by a human being).

Literary form and "plot"? (Formal cause)

These are identical. The "plot" (Greek mythos) of a poem (story, fiction) is a whole action or process as observable in nature, and as then represented in the literary work. As a whole action occurring in nature, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end -- a "shape."

A valid plot is "invented" only in the ancient sense of the word invent (from invenire, to find): It is found in nature by the poet (seer) who sees it there. The poet's essential gift is that of seeing in nature those "plots" or forms which anyone might see, but which everyone else has missed.

A poet does not make up a plot or a form out of his daydreams or by ingenuity; he finds it. Whether he then employs a common story as skeleton on which to mount it, as Shakespeare usually did, or goes directly to nature for all his materials (not at all to books) is a matter of no importance. It is only important that the artist does not pattern his work centrally on other works, rather than on nature.

It follows also that the merely literary sources of a literary work are of secondary importance; and of course that any work having only literary sources is a trivial work. (Art imitated from other art-works rather than from nature is "academic art.")

Finally, it is to be noted that "form" exists first in nature, and only secondarily in any work of art-literary form derives from, or reflects or re-echoes, natural form. The Coleridgean notion of an "organic form" existing by its own principle within poetry is fundamentally unorthodox.

The materials of "literature " or poetry? (Material cause)

The subject matters of fiction are the processes of nature, especially of human nature, and oftenest of such major human activities as war (conflict), love (union), and death (dissolution and/or rebirth).

These matters involve characteristically the relationships among persons -- as for example man-woman, child-parent, and sibling relationships. (The Oresteia, the Odyssey, the Oedipus plays.)

Such matters also are depicted against a background of the traditional bases of belief or of "values," as for example, God, home and country.

The foregoing are among the subject matters of major poetry; minor and trivial poetry is concerned with things instead of persons -- with (for example) scenery, words, books, and art-works. The orthodox type of the minor poem is the pastoral.

The tools of "literature " or poetry? (Efficient cause)

The instruments or means which the poet employs are words, or language. By means of words he represents such matters as war, love, and death, as those occur in nature.

Words are the instrument of literature; the belief of certain critics that "Words are literature" rather than merely its instrument is usually not a heresy but a barbarism. An excessive regard for words or "style" is a mark of idolatry, the mistaking of the means for the end. To write or read for the sake of words or style only is a practice defended by the "sophism of Corydon," an argument that the end of an instrument is merely its use, for any purpose whatever -- a sophistry originally intended to excuse homosexuality.

The words as employed in a literary work constitute its "style." The choice of words is the "diction" of a writer; the ordering of his words is "syntax."

Language as the poet's instrument is the "efficient cause" of literature, in traditional terminology. The poet himself can also be considered to be the instrument producing poetry -- an "efficient cause" at a further remove from the art itself. At a still further remove, those forces which condition the poet -- heredity, environment, literary and historical trends or milieux -- can also be considered to be "efficient causes." "Historical literary scholarship" of the 19th century kind, still heavily represented in American textbooks and journals, is chiefly a study of literature in terms of its efficient causes only.

As language is of much less importance to a literary work (poem or fiction) than is either its form or its material, one criterion of greatness in a literary work is that it be translatable. The major empirical evidence that Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is a minor work, for instance, is that it has apparently never been translated into a foreign tongue.

What is "literature " or poetry good for? (Final cause)

It has two major aims: 1) delight and 2) instruction. Poetry imitates nature; in so far as it imitates anything at all, it delights, for man is delighted by any imitation which he can recognize.

In so far as it imitates nature, it instructs, for it is representing the real, or things-as-they-are, and to do so is to instruct.

The notions of "delight" and "instruction" are popularly credited to Horace, who cites them as the aims of poetry. He was in fact, however, merely reciting ancient doctrine, known centuries earlier to Plato and certainly believed by Aristotle.

Delight?

The shock of recognition; a perception of the similarity ("metaphor") which the poet has already seen, and which the reader now sees.

This perception of similarities is the essentially human act (man being rational); it is the first step in learning anything, and is naturally delightful to human beings. The mind is essentially an instrument for putting things together, a catalytic agent. The traditional term for this catalytic power is wit, or knowing; Shakespeare and Homer are among the greatest catalysts or wits in literature, having seen more clearly than others what man-in-nature is truly like.

Needless to observe, an art-work cannot please one unless he can perceive also, in experiencing it, the original natural process which it imitates. Jackson Pollock's paintings cannot please those unable to see,

in his paintings, something of what Pollock saw in making the paintings.

A definition of "literature" or poetry?

As drawn from the foregoing considerations:

"Literature" (an art)	imitates	nature (e.g., war, love, death)
	by means of	words (diction and syntax)
	in the form of	1) metaphor and fiction: true or "internal form" 2) narration and/or dialogue: "external form"
	for the ends of	delight, instruction, and others such as "catharsis"

The above definition is in order of the four causes (material, efficient, formal, and final) and exactly parallels Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy. Aristotle's definition:

Tragedy imitates	men's action (serious, etc.)	(material cause)
by means of	words (various sorts, etc.)	(efficient cause)
in the form of	acting (not narration)	(formal cause)
to the end of	purging emotions aroused	(final cause)

It is to be noted that Aristotle's definition is concerned only with "external" form; form in its higher and primary sense he discusses separately as "plot" or mythos together with its contributing causes ("qualities-of-character" and "thought").

It should also be noted that Aristotle's definition is not concerned to name all the final causes of tragedy, or even the major ones (delight and instruction), but only one socially useful end of tragedy -- that it "purges" from the audience those emotions which may well be got rid of. (Despite the obscurantism of many 19th century interpreters, catharsis is a word meaning essentially purge.)

Standards of excellence?

As art imitates nature, the essential standard by which any artwork is measurable is also nature. A knowledge of critical terms or "principles," or of orthodox views like these summarized here, can be only secondarily helpful to the critic.

Art and morality?

Art is right making. Morality (prudence) is right doing. Morality consists in doing good; art, in doing well. Art aims at the good of the thing made; morality aims at the good of the maker (and user).

A murder might be well committed, and thus be a true work of art. Whether it should have been committed at all is a question of morality. The moral question is both prior and posterior, but it is not a formal question of art. The moral question takes precedence; no murder is ever justifiable, no matter how fine an art it requires or displays.

Any poem or fiction which represents the actions of man, however, will necessarily be representing moral behavior. This is to say that morality is a material (not a formal) determinant and element in any considerable fiction. The critic of poems (fictions), in judging the rightness of a represented moral action, will necessarily make judgments based on his knowledge (or ignorance) of prudence or ethics. These will not be moral judgments of persons (Shakespeare's Lear is not a bad man; he is only Shakespeare's representation of a bad man), but they will necessarily be judgments based on prudential or moral views. The critic of fiction (poems, dramas), in other words, cannot by any means limit himself to considerations which are merely technical and artistic (or "aesthetic").

Poets within the tradition have quarreled, not with morality itself, but with official morality whenever (as they would insist) such morality has degenerated into mere respectability, Pharisaism, and hypocrisy.

Nature and morality?

Nature, including non-human nature, exists in a moral order and hierarchy. The orthodox principle is simple enough, although any given exemplification of it in nature itself may be difficult to perceive and comprehend.

The orthodox principle can be indicated negatively:

- 1) Nature is not neutral, as 19th century science supposed it to be. Ruskin's notion of "the pathetic fallacy" for instance is founded on the supposition that nature is neutral; in the orthodox view, however, nature is not neutral, nature may in fact manifest pathos or feeling, and Ruskin's opinion is fallacious.
- 2) Nature is not simply evil, as Manichaeans and Puritans have asserted. The proposition that "Satan is the archon of this [natural] world" is true in a material but not in a formal sense. In so far as nature consists of unformed imperfect matter, Satan is its archon; in so far as it achieves form and being, Satan cannot be its archon.
- 3) Nature is not purely good, as deism and Leibnizian optimism have maintained. Pope's view for instance that "Whatever is, is right," is a statement traditionally considered to be a) formally true, but b) materially false. Pope's (or Candide's) deistic philosophizing is defective in attributing perfect form (pure being) to nature itself, ignoring the imperfections which are inherent in matter.

To re-state the principle affirmatively: Nature is mixed in varying proportions of good and evil. The moral hierarchy of nature, existing in accord with natural moral law, is to be found not only in human but also in non-human nature. Nevertheless, it is rarely within the range of human capabilities to

recognize and understand the non-human moral order. Hemingway and other poets (fictionists) have seriously depicted a moral hierarchy exemplified at its lower level, for example, in sharks and hyenas as distinct from higher creatures. Such poets have perhaps proceeded as far as poetic moral vision can assist them in such matters. The orthodox view maintains that the whole of nature is indeed a moral order, although much of its morality must inevitably remain a mystery to unaided human vision.

Critic?

A judge. Any reader. A qualified critic is one who knows 1) nature, and 2) the particular art in question. Such a critic is only incidentally concerned with the parts of a literary work, or even with part-whole relationships; he is chiefly concerned with whole works in their relation to general reality. He is opposed to art-works conceived as having any significant being of their own-art-works conceived as really autotelic, as having an "ontological" existence, or as existing "for their own sake." (Such attribution of being to a poet's creations is an essential element in a heresy traditionally called demonism.) An orthodox critic holds that the greatest injustice that can be done to any art-work is to take it too seriously.

Knowledge of nature and of art can be acquired only by experience plus thought plus study. A knowledge-by-description of these entities is not sufficient.

Acquiring experience takes time; for this reason there can be no such thing as a qualified young critic -- such a person cannot have lived long enough. Critics become qualified, however, only by serving an apprenticeship as unqualified critics. Young unqualified critics, if they possess a minimum of courage, can qualify as heretics. Then, after repeated pseudo-martyrdoms (for style-worship, symbol-counting, "close -analysis," and other such errors) they may find themselves transformed.

-- Arvid Shulenberger