

Poetry as Moral Statement (1937)



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The poem is a statement in words about a human experience. Words are primarily conceptual, but through use and because human experience is not purely conceptual, they have acquired connotations of feelings. The poet makes his statement in such a way as to employ both concept and connotation as efficiently as possible. The poem is good in so far as it makes a defensible rational statement about a given human experience (the experience need not be real but must be in some sense possible) and at the same time communicate the emotion which ought to be motivated by that rational understanding of that experience. This notion of poetry, whatever its defects, will account both for the power of poetry and of artistic literature in general on its readers and for the seriousness with which the great poets have taken their art....

Rhythm, for reasons which I do not wholly understand, has the power of communicating emotion; and as a part of the poem it has the power of qualifying the total emotion... We have on the one hand the rational structure of the poem, the orderly arrangement and progression of thought; and we have on the other hand a kind of rhythm broader and less easily measurable than the rhythm of the line--the poem exists in time, the mind proceeds through it in time, and if the poet is a good one he takes advantage of this fact and makes the progression rhythmical. These aspects of the poem will be efficient in so far as the poet subordinates them to the total aim of the poem....

The theories [of poetry] can all be classified, I believe, under three headings: [1] the didactic, [2] the hedonistic, and [3] the romantic. I am not in sympathy with any of these, but with a fourth, which for lack of a better term I call [4] the moralistic.... I believe that [the moralistic theory] has been loosely implicit in the inexact theorizing which has led to the most durable judgments in the history of criticism. The didactic theory of literature is simple; it is this: that literature offers us useful precepts and explicit moral instruction.... Our theory of literature must account not only for the paraphrasable content but for the work itself. The didactic theory of literature fails to do this.

The hedonist sees pleasure as the end of life, and literature either as a heightener of pleasure or as the purveyor of a particular and more or less esoteric variety of pleasure.... Certain theorists who have been aware that art is more than moral precept on the one hand and more than a search for cultivated excitement on the other have tried to account for its complexity by combining the didactic and the hedonistic theories.... [Horace]...combines the didactic with the hedonistic, telling us that the function of literature is to provide instruction (or profit) in conjunction with pleasure, to make instruction palatable....

Hedonistic theories of literature tend in the main...to take one of two forms. The first might be connected with the name of Walter Pater. According to this view there is a close relation between

hedonistic ethics and hedonistic aesthetics. Pleasure is the aim of life. Pleasure consists in intensity of experience; that is in the cultivation of the feelings for their own sake, as a good in themselves. And literature, or at any rate the arts in general, can provide a finer technique of such cultivation than can any other mode of activity.... [The] search for intensity of experience leads inevitably to an endless pursuit either of increasing degrees of violence of emotion or of increasingly elusive and more nearly meaningless nuances, and ultimately to disillusionment with art and with life.... We would be unwise to commit ourselves to it, for the ultimate consequences appear both certain and unfortunate.

The second form of hedonistic theory tends to dissociate the artistic experience sharply from all other experiences. T. S. Eliot, for example, tells us that the human experience about which the poem appears to be written has been transmuted in the aesthetic process into something new which is different in kind from all other experience. The poem is not them as it superficially appears, a statement about a human experience, but is a thing in itself. The beginnings of this notion are to be found in Poe and are developed further by the French Symbolists, notably by Mallarmé.... The chief advantage of this kind of hedonism over the Paterian variety is that one can adhere to it without adhering to a doctrine of ethical hedonism, for art and life are absolutely severed from each other. Eliot, for example, considers himself a Christian. The chief disadvantage is that it renders intelligible discussion of art impossible, and it relegates art to the position of an esoteric indulgence, possible though not certainly harmless, but hardly of sufficient importance to merit a high position among other human activities. Art, however, has always been accorded a high position, and a true theory of art should be able to account for this fact....

The Romantics...offer a fallacious and dangerous view of the nature both of literature and of man. The Romantic theory assumes that literature is mainly or even purely an emotional experience, that man is naturally good, that man's impulses are trustworthy, that the rational faculty is unreliable to the point of being dangerous or possibly evil. The Romantic theory of human nature teaches that if man will rely upon his impulses [like Hester Prynne or Edna Pontellier], he will achieve the good life. When this notion is combined, as it frequently is, with a pantheistic philosophy or religion, it commonly reaches that through surrender to impulse man will not only achieve the good life but will achieve also a kind of mystical union with the Divinity: this, for example, is the doctrine of Emerson. Literature thus becomes a form of what is known popularly as self-expression. It is not the business of man to understand and improve himself, for such an effort is superfluous: he is good as he is, if he will only let himself alone, or...let himself go....

The absolutist believes in the existence of absolute truths and values....that it is the duty of every man and of every society to endeavor as far as may be to approximate them. The relativist on the other hand, believes that there are no absolute truths, that the judgment of every man is right for himself.... The Romantic is almost inescapably a relativist, for if all men follow their impulses there will be a wide disparity of judgments and of actions.... The Emersonian formula is the perfect one: that is right for me which is after my constitution; that is right for you which is after yours; the common divinity will guide each of us in the way which is best for him. The hedonist is usually a relativist and should logically be one, but there is often an illicit and veiled recognition of absolutism in his attempts to classify the various pleasures as more or less valuable, not for himself alone but in general. The defender of the didactic view of literature has been traditionally an absolutist, but he is not invariably so....

Our literary culture (to mention nothing more) appears to me to be breaking up, and the rescue of it appears to me a matter of greater moment than the private feelings of some minor poet or scholar.... In our universities at present, for example, one or another of the hedonistic views of literature will be found to dominate, although often colored by Romantic ideas, with the result that the professors of literature, who for the most part are genteel but mediocre men, can make but a poor defense of their profession, and the professors of science, who are frequently men of great intelligence but of limited interests and education, feel a politely disguised contempt for it; and thus the study of one of the most pervasive and powerful influences on human life is traduced and neglected.... Our universities, in which relativistic doctrines are widely taught, can justify their existence only in terms of a doctrine of absolute truth. [This is the opposite of Postmodernism.] The professor of English literature, who believes that taste is relative, yet who endeavors to convince his students that *Hamlet* is more worthy of their attention than some currently popular novel, is in a serious predicament...

I am aware that my absolutism implies a theistic position, unfortunate as this admission may be. If experience appears to indicate that absolute truths exist, that we are able to work toward an approximate apprehension of them, but that they are antecedent to our apprehension and that our apprehension is seldom and perhaps never perfect, then there is only one place in which those truths may be located, and I see no way to escape this conclusion. I merely wish to point out that my critical and moral notions are derived from the observation of literature and of life, and that my theism is derived from my critical and moral notions. I did not proceed from the opposite direction.

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