

## A TENTATIVE DEFINITION OF LITERATURE

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## PROSE AND CON

A logical body of knowledge is based upon premises accepted, within that body, as fact. The premises upon which this defense of literary art is based are to be found in the nature of man.

Man is mortal, fallen and fallible; he is created "a little lower than the angels". He finds himself in a life of contraries in which he is continually faced with the dichotomy between life and death, good and evil, light and darkness, mortality and immortality, time and the eternal. His existence is well illustrated by Bede's story of the bird, who for a brief period of his flight is in the warmth and light of the mead hall and then, as before, is flying through the darkness and fury of the unknown night.

Man is also aware of time. Each moment is now, with the past crowding up behind him like people in a theatre queue. In William Golding's *Free Fall*, the persona, Samuel Mountjoy says, "My yesterday's walk with me. They keep step, they are the grey faces that peer over my shoulder." The future is before man like the dark into which the subway train moves. T.S. Eliot in "Burnt Norton" speaks of the moment now, when it is a moment of perception in time, the moment becoming eternal or out of time because of the perception:

"Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage  
Quick now, here, now, always —  
Ridiculous the waste sad time  
Stretching before and after."

Man is also alone. In the agony of his existence through the moments of linear time he strives for the warmth, light, and companionship of Bede's hall, but constantly finds around him the world which is not himself; terrifying, unknown, unknowable. He exists at the permanent now on a time-line at the point where a perpendicular axis of personal aloneness crosses.

Only the means of communication are required. Sounds which name ideas and things are invented or learned and thus man is able to talk. Then the discovery is made that words alone do not always succeed. Each of us is made aware of this and our aloneness is re-realized. There are several escapes. One can accept the illusion of communication, one can accept the aloneness or one can search for a more successful means of communication.

Let us go back to Samuel Mountjoy speaking of the aloneness and of the resolution of the artist:

"We are dumb and blind, yet  
we must see and speak.

Not the stubbled face of  
Sammy Mountjoy, the full lips  
that open to let his hand take  
out a fag, not the smooth, wet  
muscles inside round teeth, not  
the gullet, the lung, the heart. . .  
It is the unnamable, unfathomable  
and invisible darkness that  
sits at the centre of him. . .  
that hopes hopelessly to understand  
and be understood. Our  
loneliness . . . is the loneliness  
of the dark thing that sees . . .  
by reflection, feels by remote  
control and hears only words  
passed to it in a foreign tongue.  
To communicate is our passion  
and our despair."

But Sammy, the artist, resolves his dilemma:

"There is this hope, I may communicate  
in part; and that surely is better  
than utter blind and dumb . . .  
Not that I aspire to complete  
coherence."

Another answer, or rather, the same answer in a more detailed form is given by T.S. Eliot (again in "Burnt Norton").

"Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is  
only living  
Can only die. Words after  
speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the  
form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar  
still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness."

If "that which is only living --

can only die", where is found the form which is able to move "perpetually in its stillness"? It is, of course, in a work of art.

If a man should understand a thing or idea essentially, he sees in his mind the form of that object. But how does he completely describe that object to another person? If the object to be spoken of is the man's idea of love, how is perfect communication to be accomplished?

The artist first needs a medium in which to represent his concept - for convenience, shall we call this concept a "feeling". If the work of art is to be in the literary medium, words are chosen arranged and finally crystallized into a form. This form recreates in the medium the original essence. If the formed meaning is comprehended by the reader he will comprehend the original essence.

How then, is a work of art made? What is the nature of this means of communication that enables a few formed words to convey an essence which many thousands cannot? Let us use the example of a painter -- painting being art in a different medium from that of the literary arts.

The painter conceives of his feelings (as defined above) in visual terms, as do the cavemen of Golding's *The Inheritors*. To translate the feeling to a form in his medium the painter puts the picture on a canvas, paper, panel or some other usually (flat) surface. The crude picture in the mind will be refined by precise techniques learned by the painter over the years of his apprenticeship. It will depend upon the temperament of the man himself, whether the refinement is done before the first pencil stroke (as is the case with a painter I know) or is done in a process of years during the actualization of the painting onto the canvas (as was the case with Cezanne and Ryder).

An almost infinite variety of choices present themselves to the painter in matters of colour, tone, line, subject, composition, materials, etc. Only through constant practice does the man achieve perfection of technique required to create forms with ease. Pound says "The mastery of any art is the work of a lifetime" and again "The touchstone of an art is its precision."

With his many decisions made and the work executed the form is actualized in paint on the canvas. When this two dimensional object is placed on a wall and another man looks at it with an open mind, the artist knows that his eyes will be drawn back and forth by the pattern and that the mind will be affected in a predetermined order by the particular configurations of colour and line. He knows that the form will gradually impress itself upon the mind of the willing viewer.

The correspondence of this exposition to the literary arts should be quite obvious. The reason for the analogy in the first place is that the same analysis of artistic method applied to word -- forms often leads to misunderstandings due to the fact that the method of logic usually involves words. In fact with this analysis complete and understood, perhaps we should deal with logic and philosophy in relation to the arts.

When man knows his aloneness, when he has reached the situation we examined above, he is presented with two methods of knowing. He has vague feelings in his mine and in his attempt to understand them, or to let others understand them, he begins to examine them. He has two methods, the one synthetic, the other analytic. We have watched synthesis at work. The painter tries to build a likeness or correspondence to his feeling. He tries different configurations of line and colour, etc., until he strikes upon one which will effect the translation. He recreates the original. Aristotle called this an imitation.

Yet the man may try another method. This is analysis. By this method, rather than build a cor-

respondence, he takes apart the original into its components. Again by using techniques learned over many years, sometimes in bursts of inspiration, the man is able to analyse each separate component of his idea. When these are spoken or written they may be built up again by the listener into the original concept. The end is the same, the method different.

Perhaps a word or two should also be said about art and technology. It is suggested by some that art is becoming unnecessary in the face of technological advances in the world today. The answer is that technology is based on science and science is, like art, religion, or philosophy, just another way of stating man's conclusion about the otherness of his existence. Each person may choose for himself the discipline he wishes to use. That is his prerogative. It can only be said that none of the disciplines has ever answered beyond all doubt the very big questions of existence. Be it science, philosophy, religion or art, the relative values of each always depend upon the one great variable factor; man. Each discipline has its great ages. We can, in fact, point out in friendly reconciliation that these ages are often concurrent. In any discipline, "I see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known." (1 Cor. 13:12).

In his book entitled simply *Art*, Clive Bell speaks of, "a question so absurd that the nicest people never tire of asking it: 'What is the moral justification of art?'" He says a few sentences later "It is the artist's duty to reply: 'Art is good because it exalts to a state of ecstasy better far than anything a benumbed moralist can even guess at; so shut up'". This is the artist's reply. Mr. Bell, the philosopher goes on to justify art in his own way.

"To justify ethically any human activity, we must inquire--'Is it a means to good states of mind?' In the case of art our answer will be prompt and emphatic. Art is not only a means to good states of mind, but perhaps the most direct and potent we possess."

Jacques Maritain, the Catholic aesthetician says in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, "The man who possesses the virtue of art is not infallible in his work, because often while acting he does not use his virtue. But the virtue of art is of itself never wrong." This is precisely why Mountjoy says as we noted above, "I may communicate in part; . . . Not that I aspire to complete coherence."

R.G. Collingwood in *The Principle of Art* says "The artist . . . is a person who talks or expresses himself and his expression in no way depends upon or demands the co-operation of an audience."

The last quotation of this series is from Ezra Pound who, in an essay entitled "The Serious Artist" says,

"Now art never asks anybody to do anything, or to think anything or to be anything. It exists as the trees exist, you can admire, sit in the shade, you can pick bananas, you can cut firewood, you can do as you jolly well please.

Those of you who are acquainted with Pound's work will say "Yes, but what of his grand claims about the poet's duty in regard to the preservation of the language and thus to the preservation of the state?" The answer can be seen in this quotation; "Art never asks anybody, . . ." Perhaps the moralist should be answered as Bell's artist would answer him; perhaps he should be told to keep his nose out of art as it is none of his business.

Maritain says there is a contradiction between art and morality. They are different by way of or by reason of contrast. The excuse for the existence of art, as apart from its reasons for existence, is that it exists, i.e., it need give no excuses.