

CHAPTER III

The Function of Literature

The nature and the function of literature must, in any coherent discourse, be correlative. The use of poetry follows from its nature: every object or class of objects is most efficiently and rationally used for what it is, or is centrally. It acquires a secondary use only when its prime function has lapsed: the old spinning wheel becomes an ornament, or a specimen in a museum; the square piano, no longer capable of music, is made into a useful desk. Similarly, the nature of an object follows from its use: it is what it does. An artifact has the structure proper to the performance of its function, together with whatever accessories time and materials may make it possible, and taste may think it desirable, to add. There may be much in any literary work which is unnecessary to its literary function, though interesting or defensible on other grounds.

Have conceptions of the nature and the function of literature changed in the course of history? The question is not easy to answer. If one goes far enough back, one can say yes; one can reach a time when literature, philosophy, and religion exist undifferentiated: among the Greeks, Aeschylus and Hesiod would perhaps be instances. But Plato can already speak of the quarrel between the poets and the philosophers as an ancient quarrel and mean by it something intelligible to us. We must not, on the other hand, exaggerate the difference made by doctrines of "art for art's sake" at the end of the nineteenth century or more recent doctrines of "*poésie pure*." The "didactic heresy," as Poe called the belief in poetry as an instrument of edification, is not to be equated with the traditional Renaissance doctrine that the poem pleases and teaches or teaches through pleasing.

On the whole, the reading of a history of aesthetics or poetics leaves one with the impression that the nature and the function of literature, so far as they can be put into large general con-

ceptual terms, for comparison and contrast with other human activities and values, have not basically changed.

The history of aesthetics might almost be summarized as a dialectic in which the thesis and counterthesis are Horace's *dulce* and *utile*: poetry is sweet and useful. Either adjective separately represents a polar heresy with regard to the function of poetry—probably it is easier to correlate *dulce et utile* on the basis of function than on that of nature. The view that poetry is pleasure (analogous to any other pleasure) answers to the view that poetry is instruction (analogous to any textbook).¹ The view that all poetry is, or should be, propaganda is answered by the view that it is, or should be, pure sound and image—arabesque without reference to the world of human emotions. The opposing theses reach their subtlest versions, perhaps, in the views that art is “play” and that it is “work” (the “craft” of fiction, the “work” of art). Neither view, in isolation, can possibly seem acceptable. Told that poetry is “play,” spontaneous amusement, we feel that justice has been done neither to the care, skill, and planning of the artist nor to the seriousness and importance of the poem; but told that poetry is “work” or “craft,” we feel the violence done to its joy and what Kant called its “purposelessness.” We must describe the function of art in such a way as to do justice at once to the *dulce* and the *utile*.

The Horatian formula itself offers a helpful start if, remembering that precision in the use of critical terms is very recent, we give the Horatian terms an extension generous enough to encompass Roman and Renaissance creative practice. The usefulness of art need not be thought to lie in the enforcement of such a moral lesson as Le Bossu held to be Homer's reason for writing the *Iliad*, or even such as Hegel found in his favorite tragedy, *Antigone*. “Useful” is equivalent to “not a waste of time,” not a form of “passing the time,” something deserving of serious attention. “Sweet” is equivalent to “not a bore,” “not a duty,” “its own reward.”

Can we use this double criterion as a basis of definition of literature, or is it rather a criterion of great literature? In older discussions, the distinctions between great, good, and “subliterary” literature rarely appear. There may be real doubt whether subliterary literature (the pulp magazine) is “useful”

or "instructive." It is commonly thought of as sheer "escape" and "amusement." But the question has to be answered in terms of subliterate readers, not in those of readers of "good literature." Mortimer Adler, at least, would find a noetic element in the interest of the least intellectual novel reader. And as for "escape," Kenneth Burke has reminded us how facile a charge that may become. The dream of escape may "assist a reader to clarify his dislike of the environment in which he is placed. The artist can . . . become 'subversive' by merely singing, in all innocence, of respite by the Mississippi."² In answer to our question, it is probable that all art is "sweet" and "useful" to its appropriate users: that what it articulates is superior to their own self-induced reverie or reflection; that it gives them pleasure by the skill with which it articulates what they take to be something like their own reverie or reflection and by the release they experience through this articulation.

When a work of literature functions successfully, the two "notes" of pleasure and utility should not merely coexist but coalesce. The pleasure of literature, we need to maintain, is not one preference among a long list of possible pleasures but is a "higher pleasure" because pleasure in a higher kind of activity, i.e., non-acquisitive contemplation. And the utility—the seriousness, the instructiveness—of literature is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e., not the seriousness of a duty which must be done or of a lesson to be learned but an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception. The relativist who likes difficult modern poetry can always shrug off aesthetic judgment by making his taste a personal preference, on the level of crossword puzzles or chess. The educationist may falsely locate the seriousness of a great poem or novel, as in the historical information it purveys or the helpful moral lesson.

Another point of importance: Has literature a function, or functions? In his *Primer for Critics*, Boas gaily expounds a pluralism of interests and corresponding types of criticism; and, at the end of his *Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot sadly, or at least wearily, insists on the "variety of poetry" and the variety of things the kinds of poetry may do at various times. But these are exceptions. To take art, or literature, or poetry seriously is, ordinarily at least, to attribute to it some use proper

to itself. Considering Arnold's view that poetry could supersede religion and philosophy, Eliot writes: ". . . nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else. . . ." ³ That is, no real category of value has a real equivalent. There are no real substitutes. In practice, literature can obviously take the place of many things—of travel or sojourn in foreign lands, of direct experience, vicarious life; and it can be used by the historian as a social document. But has literature a work, a use, which nothing else does as well? Or is it an amalgam of philosophy, history, music, and imagery which, in a really modern economy, would be distributed? This is the basic question.

The defenders of literature will believe that it is not an archaic survival but a permanence, and so will many who are neither poets nor teachers of poetry and who therefore lack the professional interest in survival. The experience of unique value in literature is basic to any theory concerning the nature of the value. Our shifting theories attempt to do progressively better justice to the experience.

One contemporary line asserts the use and seriousness of poetry by finding that poetry conveys knowledge—a kind of knowledge. Poetry is a form of knowledge. Aristotle had seemed to say something like that in his famous dictum that poetry is more philosophical than history, since history "relates things which have happened, poetry such as might happen," the general and probable. Now, however, when history, like literature, appears a loose, ill-defined discipline, and when science, rather, is the impressive rival, it is, rather, contended that literature gives a knowledge of those particularities with which science and philosophy are not concerned. While a neoclassical theorist like Dr. Johnson could still think of poetry in terms of the "grandeur of generality," modern theorists, of many schools (e.g., Gilby, Ransom, Stace), all stress the particularity of poetry. Says Stace, the play *Othello* is not about jealousy but about Othello's jealousy, the particular kind of jealousy a Moor married to a Venetian might feel.⁴

The typicality of literature or the particularity: literary theory and apologetics may stress one or the other; for literature, one may say, is more general than history and biography but more particularized than psychology or sociology. But not only are

there shifts in the stress of literary theory. In literary practice, the specific degree of generality or particularity shifts from work to work and period to period. Pilgrim and Everyman undertake to be mankind. But Morose, the "humorist" of Jonson's *Epi-coene*, is a very special and idiosyncratic person. The principle of characterization in literature has always been defined as that of combining the "type" with the "individual"—showing the type in the individual or the individual in the type. The attempts at interpreting this principle, or specific dogmas derived from it, have not been very helpful. Literary typologies go back to the Horatian doctrine of decorum, and to the repertory of types in Roman comedy (e.g., the bragging soldier, the miser, the spend-thrift and romantic son, the confidential servant). We recognize the typological again in the character books of the seventeenth century and in the comedies of Molière. But how to apply the concept more generally? Is the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* a type? If so, of what? Is Hamlet a type? Apparently, for an Elizabethan audience, a melancholiac, something as described by Dr. Timothy Bright. But he is many other things also, and his melancholy is given a particular genesis and context. In some sense, the character which is an individual as well as a type is so constituted by being shown to be many types: Hamlet is also a lover, or former lover, a scholar, a connoisseur of the drama, a fencer. Every man is a convergence or nexus of types—even the simplest man. So-called character types are seen "flat," as all of us see people with whom we have relations of a single kind; "round" characters combine views and relations, are shown in different contexts—public life, private, foreign lands.⁵

One cognitive value in the drama and novels would seem to be psychological. "The novelists can teach you more about human nature than the psychologists" is a familiar kind of assertion. Horney recommends Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Balzac as inexhaustible sources. E. M. Forster (*Aspects of the Novel*) speaks of the very limited number of persons whose inner life and motivations we know, and sees it as the great service of the novel that it does reveal the introspective life of the characters.⁶ Presumably the inner lives he assigns his characters are drawn out of his own vigilant introspection. One might maintain that the great novels are source books for psychologists,

or that they are case histories (i.e., illustrative, typical examples). But here we seem to come back to the fact that psychologists will use the novel only for its generalized typical value: they will draw off the character of Père Goriot from the total setting (the Maison Vauquer) and context of characters.

Max Eastman, himself a minor poet, would deny that the "literary mind" can, in an age of science, lay claim to the discovery of truth. The "literary mind" is simply the unspecialized, amateur mind of prescientific days attempting to persist and taking advantage of its verbal facility to create the impression that it is uttering the really important "truths." Truth in literature is the same as truth outside of literature, i.e., systematic and publicly verifiable knowledge. The novelist has no magic short cut to that present state of knowledge in the social sciences which constitutes the "truth" against which his "world," his fictional reality, is to be checked. But then, believes Eastman, the imaginative writer—and especially the poet—misunderstands himself if he thinks of his prime office as that of discovering and communicating knowledge. His real function is to make us perceive what we see, imagine what we already, conceptually or practically, know.⁷

It is difficult to draw the line between views of poetry as realization of the given and views of poetry as "artistic insight." Does the artist remind us of what we have ceased to perceive or make us see what, though it was there all the time, we had not seen? One remembers the black and white drawings in which there are concealed figures or faces composed of dots and broken lines: they were there all the time, but one did not see them as wholes, as designs. In his *Intentions*, Wilde cites Whistler's discovery of aesthetic value in fog, of the Pre-Raphaelite discovery of beauty in types of women hitherto not seen as beautiful or as types. Are these instances of "knowledge" or "truth"? We hesitate. They are discoveries of new "perceptual values," we say, of new "aesthetic qualities."

One sees generally why aestheticians hesitate to deny "truth" as a property and a criterion of art:⁸ partly, it is an honorific term, and one registers one's serious respect for art, one's apprehension of it as one of the supreme values, by the attribution; and partly, one is illogically fearful that if art isn't "true" it is

a "lie," as Plato, in violence, called it. Imaginative literature is a "fiction," an artistic, verbal "imitation of life." The opposite of "fiction" is not "truth" but "fact" or "time and space existence." "Fact" is stranger than the probability with which literature must deal.⁹

Among the arts, literature, specifically, seems also to claim "truth" through the view of life (*Weltanschauung*) which every artistically coherent work possesses. The philosopher or critic must think some of these "views" truer than others (as Eliot thinks Dante's truer than Shelley's or even than Shakespeare's); but any mature philosophy of life must have some measure of truth—at any event it lays claim to it. The truth of literature, as we are now considering it, seems to be the truth *in* literature—the philosophy which exists, in systematic conceptual form, outside of literature but may be applied to or illustrated by or embodied in literature. In this sense, the truth in Dante is Catholic theology and scholastic philosophy. Eliot's view of poetry in its relation to "truth" seems essentially of this sort. Truth is the province of systematic thinkers; and artists are not such thinkers, though they may try to be if there are no philosophers whose work they can suitably assimilate.¹⁰

The whole controversy would appear, in large measure, semantic. What do we mean by "knowledge," "truth," "cognition," "wisdom"? If all truth is conceptual and propositional, then the arts—even the art of literature—can't be forms of truth. Again: if positivist reductive definitions are accepted, limiting truth to that which can be methodically verified by anyone, then art can't be a form of truth experimentally. The alternative to these seems some bi-modal or pluri-modal truth: there are various "ways of knowing"; or there are two basic types of knowledge, each of which uses a language system of signs: the sciences, which use the "discursive" mode, and the arts, which use the "presentational."¹¹ Are these both truth? The former is what philosophers have ordinarily meant, while the latter takes care of religious "myth" as well as poetry. We might call the latter "true" rather than "the truth." The adjectival quality would express the distinction in center of balance: art is substantively beautiful and adjectively true (i.e., it doesn't conflict with the truth). In his "Ars Poetica," MacLeish at-

tempts to adjust the claims of literary beauty and philosophy by the formula, a poem is "equal to: not true": poetry is as serious and important as philosophy (science, knowledge, wisdom) and possesses the equivalence of truth, is truth-like.

Mrs. Langer stresses the plastic arts and, still more, music, rather than literature, in her plea for presentational symbolism as a form of knowledge. Presumably she thinks of literature as in some way a mixture of "discursive" and "presentational." But the mythic element, or archetypal images, of literature would correspond to her presentational. "Men who follow the sea," she writes, "have often a deep love for that hard life. But in their dangerous calling they feel secure; in their comfortless quarters they are at ease. Waters and ships, heaven and storm and harbor, somehow contain the symbols through which they see meaning and sense in the world. . . ." ¹²

From views that art is revelation or insight into the truth we should distinguish the view that art—specifically literature—is propaganda, the view, that is, that the writer is not the discoverer but the persuasive purveyor of the truth. The term "propaganda" is loose and needs scrutiny. In popular speech, it is applied only to doctrines viewed as pernicious and spread by men whom we distrust. The word implies calculation, intention, and is usually applied to specific, rather restricted doctrines or programs.¹³ So limiting the sense of the term, one might say that some art (the lowest kind) is propaganda, but that no great art, or good art, or Art, can possibly be. If, however, we stretch the term to mean "effort, whether conscious or not, to influence readers to share one's attitude toward life," then there is plausibility in the contention that all artists are propagandists or should be, or (in complete reversal of the position outlined in the preceding sentence) that all sincere, responsible artists are morally obligated to be propagandists.

According to Montgomery Belgion, the literary artist is an "irresponsible propagandist." That is to say, every writer adopts a view or theory of life. . . . The effect of the work is always to *persuade* the reader to accept that view or theory. This persuasion is always illicit. That is to say, the reader is always led to believe something, and that assent is hypnotic—the art of the presentation seduces the reader. . . ." Eliot, who quotes Bel-

gion, replies by distinguishing "poets whom it is a strain to think of as propagandists at all" from irresponsible propagandists, and a third group who, like Lucretius and Dante, are "particularly conscious and responsible" propagandists; and Eliot makes the judgment of responsibility depend on both auctorial intention and historic effect.¹⁴ "Responsible propagandist" would seem to most people a contradiction in terms; but, interpreted as a tension of pulls, it makes a point. Serious art implies a view of life which can be stated in philosophical terms, even in terms of systems.¹⁵ Between artistic coherence (what is sometimes called "artistic logic") and philosophical coherence there is some kind of correlation. The responsible artist has no will to confuse emotion and thinking, sensibility and intellection, sincerity of feeling with adequacy of experience and reflection. The view of life which the responsible artist articulates perceptually is not, like most views which have popular success as "propaganda," simple; and an adequately complex vision of life cannot, by hypnotic suggestion, move to premature or naïve action.

It remains to consider those conceptions of the function of literature clustered about the word "catharsis." The word—Aristotle's Greek, in the *Poetics*—has had a long history. The exegesis of Aristotle's use of the word remains in dispute; but what Aristotle may have meant, an exegetical problem of interest, need not be confounded with the problems to which the term has come to be applied. The function of literature, some say, is to relieve us—either writers or readers—from the pressure of emotions. To express emotions is to get free of them, as Goethe is said to have freed himself from *Weltschmerz* by composing *The Sorrows of Werther*. And the spectator of a tragedy or the reader of a novel is also said to experience release and relief. His emotions have been provided with focus, leaving him, at the end of his aesthetic experience, with "calm of mind."¹⁶

But does literature relieve us of emotions or, instead, incite them? Tragedy and comedy, Plato thought, "nourish and water our emotions when we ought to dry them up." Or, if literature relieves us of our emotions, are they not wrongly discharged when they are expended on poetic fictions? As a youth, St. Augustine confesses, he lived in mortal sin; yet "all this I wept not, I who wept for Dido slain. . . ." Is some literature in-

citory and some cathartic, or are we to distinguish between groups of readers and the nature of their response? ¹⁷ Again: should all art be cathartic? These are problems for treatment under "The Relation of Literature to Psychology" and "The Relation of Literature to Society"; but they have, preliminarily, to be raised now.

That, for proper readers, literature does not and should not incite the emotions is our hypothetical answer. Emotions represented in literature are, neither for writer nor for reader, the same as emotions in "real life"; they are "recollected in tranquillity"; they are "expressed"—that is, released—by analysis; they are the *feelings* of emotions, the perceptions of emotions.

To conclude: the question concerning the function of literature has a long history—in the Western world, from Plato down to the present. It is not a question instinctively raised by the poet or by those who like poetry; for such, "Beauty is its own excuse for being," as Emerson was once drawn into saying. The question is put, rather, by utilitarians and moralists, or by statesmen and philosophers, that is, by the representatives of other special values or the speculative arbiters of all values. What, they ask, is the use of poetry anyhow—*cui bono*? And they ask the question at the full social or human dimension. Thus challenged, the poet and the instinctive reader of poetry are forced, as morally and intellectually responsible citizens, to make some reasoned reply to the community. They do so in a passage of an *Ars Poetica*. They write a *Defense* or *Apology* for poetry: the literary equivalent of what is called in theology "apologetics."¹⁸ Writing to this end and for this prospective audience, they naturally stress the "use" rather than the "delight" of literature; and hence it would be semantically easy today to equate the "function" of literature with its extrinsic relations. But from the Romantic movement on, the poet has often given, when challenged by the community, a different answer: the answer which A. C. Bradley calls "poetry for poetry's sake";¹⁹ and theorists do well to let the term "function" serve the whole "apologetic" range. So using the word, we say, poetry has many possible functions. Its prime and chief function is fidelity to its own nature.