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Artistic Vision In Literature

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In any art, the artist faces the problem of presenting a creative vision through a medium. Sound, paint, marble, clay and other materials are the media of music and the visual arts. Literature uses as its medium that phenomenon of civilization, the word. No matter what his art, the artist must be faithful to his medium, shaping it by his creativity to form a unified work, or else he loses his effect as an artist in his chosen medium."

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Artistic Vision In Literature

JOHN ATTINASI, *c.s.b.*

In any art, the artist faces the problem of presenting a creative vision through a medium. Sound, paint, marble, clay and other materials are the media of music and the visual arts. Literature uses as its medium that phenomenon of civilization, the word. No matter what his art, the artist must be faithful to his medium, shaping it by his creativity to form a unified work, or else he loses his effect as an artist in his chosen medium.

Words are used everyday in non-artistic communication. These words have definite, even though arbitrary meanings. Thus the literary artist's medium is and must be a message-bearer. But it is not merely message-bearing, because the finished work is art; there is still a basic need for sensible beauty. The beauty in literature must come from words. And it does. Words in their sound, spelling and sense suggest other words and set up reactions in themselves and in juxtaposition with other words:

—shower sour cower tower dour Dieu
 bower hour flower now-er
—lower mower sower knower bow-er
 hoe-er slower

Where communication is removed, the art degenerates into 'word-music,' at best. Where the element of beauty is removed, the art degenerates into philosophy, at best.

A marriage of the two is essential to the art: "beauty" because literature is art, and "meaning" because the art is pre-

sented in a communicative medium. This marriage is difficult because the spouses are so over-bearing, in a good sense, in their own right. Only deep understanding and deep love produce the union.

Some authors and appreciators come to be so preoccupied with the thought or 'philosophy' presented in a work that they neglect the poetical part of literature, the structure, the phrasing, the description, and all the area in between these. This is like putting meat, vegetable, salad, wine and pudding into a bowl, chopping them up with a knife and eating this banquet with a spoon. There is no savor, no delight and you never get to use your fork.

Those who give predominant place to the presentation often regard meaning of no consequence to the art, and what is worse, of no benefit to the appreciator. Or sometimes the opinion is held that the only meaning in art is that art's beauty is everything:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.

—*Keats*.

If the art is to be true to its medium, it must contain meaning; and the greater the meaning, the greater the art. And we must say the same for beauty. In literature, it is just as much an error to ignore the sense as it is to ignore the beauty.

In approaching literature, the first object is to apprehend the artistic vision of the author. Here the distinction between meaning and beauty shows itself to be only a mental one. In the paper and ink of the books, in the **words**, the thought cannot be separated from the form anymore than the form can be separated from the thought. Both are presented in the words and the words have in themselves the unity of beauty and thought which is proper to every art.

After the artist's vision has been apprehended, and this may be done only in part with the greatest authors, one may

proceed to discuss the concrete, person-changing effects of the work's vision. In this area the effect of literature becomes highly subjective. One may discuss, one may submit personal opinion concerning the validity and value of the artist's vision. This is not to say that there should not be exchange and growth in the understanding and realizing of the author's vision; it is just to say that one cannot pronounce dogmatically in these matters.

I have used the term, 'the artist's vision,' not 'his thought content,' or 'his philosophy.' I say this because artistic vision is not just intellectual insight. It may be, and often is, this. In the best writers, though, artistic vision is the fruit of reason—**plus**. Or it may be a non-reasoned vision alone, such as found in oriental haiku and in other highly subtle literature:

They spoke no word	Blowing from the west
the visitor, the host	fallen leaves
and the white chrysanthemum.	gather in the east.

—BUSON.

There is vision here; it is not technique alone or beauty alone without meaning. It is artistic vision in the art of literature. It is a vision close to that of music or the plastic arts, a wordless, non-conceptual one, and it lies below the message-bearing exterior of the literary work's words. The vision is **in the words**, though and still proper to the literary art, that is, it has meaning and beauty.

Of the works that we call literature there are those strictly of thought content, or (heaven forbid) strictly of story. These need be read only once. After the meaning has been extracted, the work may be paraphrased and the text is useless. And there are those strictly of technique, and these need be read only once. They are a pleasant, one-time experience, but of no lasting value. But the irreducible work is the blend, the sound and sense work, the work which can never be paraphrased, never imitated, the work which can only be quoted; this is the true work of literary art.