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## CAN A LIE BE TRULY BEAUTIFUL?

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### I INTRODUCTION



IN THE CENTURY since 1850 literature that presents a deterministic, atheistic view of the world, a philosophy of despair, has become increasingly common and popular. This literature, which frequently deserves praise for its technical polish, presents a false view of human nature and society; and except perhaps for the sake of blasphemy, it ignores God altogether. In the novels of Thomas Hardy, for example, man is represented as the plaything of a malignant fate. Hardy's mocking blasphemy at the end of the tragic story of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* very adequately epitomizes his world view: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess." Tess, by the way, had been hanged for murder, but for a murder to which she was driven by circumstances, or rather by Hardy's malignant chance. Other members of the naturalistic school of fiction may present man as absolutely determined by biological, psychological, or social forces. To wit, Zola in France, Dreiser in America, and the communist novelist in any language.

Determinism, pessimism, despair are equally as common in modern poetry. Where could one stop in listing writers of such works? The classically pessimistic verses of A. E. Housman should be sufficient example. No one ever chiselled more perfect stanzas out of the marble of English words. And no one ever presented a more dismal outlook. The poems of *A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems* are Horatian in their restraint and polish, but they are decadent in their despair. What sophomoric atheist has not delighted in Housman's blasphemous verses?

We for certainty are not the first

Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled

Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed

Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.

Or has not quoted with zest Housman's ironic parody of the gospel, verses which end with the specious logic of suicide?

If it chance your eye offend you,  
 Pluck it out, lad, and be sound:  
 'Twill hurt, but here are salves to friend you,  
 And many a balsam grows on ground.

And if your hand or foot offend you,  
 Cut it off, lad, and be whole;  
 But play the man, stand up and end you,  
 When your sickness is your soul.

The basis of Housman's despair, as of Hardy's, is the apparent disorder of the universe. He sees no benevolent Providence guiding things to their end. All that happens is the result of the ironic disorder of chance. No infinite God, wise and loving, rules the universe. No revelation has unveiled the obscure end of man. No natural law governs men and society. Man himself is not a moral agent, freely choosing the end toward which he moves. He is not a rational animal, but some sort of higher animal, superior to beasts but not essentially distinct from them. He is at the mercy of blind natural forces inside or outside of himself, and he knows not and chooses not the end for which he acts. Such is the modern view of man and of the universe in which he lives. It is characteristic of modern poetry, drama, and fiction. It can be summed up in one word: DISORDER.

Now it cannot be denied that many modern pessimistic literary works have a certain appeal, even beauty, and that they give a kind of esthetic pleasure. But what sort of beauty is it? Is it the highest? Is it true beauty? Can a work of literature that completely de-orders the universe, that enshrines falsehood in perfect form be considered really beautiful, as beautiful as one which so enshrines truth? In brief, what is the relation between beauty and truth in literature? Can the false as false be truly beautiful?

To answer these questions we must investigate the nature of literature and of beauty. Then we can decide what should be the properties or characteristics of a perfect work of literature and we can answer the question as to whether or not the false, as false, can be beautiful.

It would of course be possible for prudence to reject the works quoted above on moral grounds. But the relation between art and morality is not within the scope of this article. We abstract from it entirely.

## II THE DEFINITION OF LITERATURE

First, what is literature? Literature is an art. It is called art by analogy of attribution. Literature, in other words, is a work of art and is denominated art only because there is a causal connection between the work and the real art of literature. Art in its primary and proper sense, the prime analogate of art from which literature derives its name as art, is an intellectual virtue, a habit of the mind pertaining to the practical order. "Art . . . properly speaking, is an operative habit," says St. Thomas.<sup>1</sup> It is an operative virtue directed toward making a work good and praiseworthy. Thus it is distinguished from speculative virtues, like science, which order the mind to knowledge, which perfect the mind itself. Art then is a practical intellectual virtue. As "the right reason of things to be made" (*recta ratio factibilium*),<sup>2</sup> art has the end of making the intellect produce a good work in external matter. It aims at perfecting a work outside of man, the maker of the work.

Just as we have habits—good or bad—by which we walk with more or less grace, eat with good or bad table manners, and speak English rather than French with more or less clarity and fluency, so does the artist have a habit of mind by which he conceives and executes some external work. The habit of art directs the mind of the poet to conceive a story with characters of a certain kind, to select the right words to tell the story and portray the characters, and to arrange the words in the form best suited to his end. The habit of art likewise directs the mind of the musician to conceive and write a song, the mind of the sculptor to design a statue and his fingers to execute it, the mind of the choreographer to plan a ballet and his body, perhaps, to perform it. The habit of art also guides the mind of the carpenter in designing and making a table. By his art he plans the table, chooses the best kind of wood, cuts, fits, joins and polishes it.

As these examples indicate, art, which is an intellectual virtue of the practical order, is of two kinds: fine or liberal, and useful or mechanical. The latter makes a work that has a use beyond itself; for example, the art of carpentry makes tables and chairs to be used as furniture. On the other hand, the fine arts—poetry, music, architecture, sculpture, painting, dancing, etc.—are not ordained to making works which have any use beyond themselves, but to making

<sup>1</sup> The *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 21 vols., London, 1911-1921, I IIae, 57, 3.

<sup>2</sup> I IIae, 57, 4.

works of beauty in which the mind rests and is satisfied. A work of fine art is therefore an end in itself, in the sense that it need not point to anything beyond itself, that it need not present a moral or religious truth, though of course it may and often does.

In brief then, literature, often called poetry broadly speaking, is in its primary sense a practical intellectual virtue which makes a work of beauty. It is a fine art. But this is not literature in its common and popular sense. When we read literature, we are not concerned with a virtue, or a habit, but with works produced by the habit, just as when we go to an art gallery we go not to look at people's minds and observe their intellectual virtues, but to look at pictures and statues, at works of art. So the commonest meaning of art and of literature is the secondary and analogous one. But there are also other analogous meanings of art and literature: the operations of the artist directed by the intellectual virtue of art, and the set of rules for making a work, a group of principles conceived by the intellect under the guidance of the virtue of art. Thus literature, a fine art, is at once:

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| 1. An intellectual virtue .....        | the prime analogate       |
| 2. An operation.                       | } secondary<br>analogates |
| 3. A set of principles or rules.       |                           |
| 4. A WORK produced by the above three. |                           |

It is literature in this fourth sense which concerns us, literature as a *work* of fine art. Like all of the fine arts, literature is an imitation, a representation, a sign of something other than itself. This generic character of art as imitation is clearly stated by Aristotle in the prologue and first chapter of his *Poetics*. Here he definitely mentions four of the fine arts as "modes of imitation"<sup>3</sup>: poetry (dramatic, epic, and lyric), music (lyre-playing, flute-playing, voice), painting (color and form), and dancing. Poetry, or literature, differs specifically from the other fine arts in the means or medium which it uses in imitation. This medium is language. Its object, the actions of men,<sup>4</sup> is common to the other fine arts, says Aristotle. Also, like the other fine arts, poetry seeks to represent the actions of men beautifully, to evoke an esthetic response, to give delight and joy in the contemplation of some phase of human experience.

<sup>3</sup> *Poetics*, 1447a. All quotations from Aristotle's *Poetics* are taken from the translation of Ingram Bywater in vol. XI of *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross, 11 vols., Oxford, 1928, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> *Poetics*, II, 1448a.

At this point a preliminary, tentative definition of literature can be attempted. *A work of literature is a sign which represents some aspect of human life beautifully through the medium of language.*

In the explanation of two notions contained in this definition—imitation and beauty—the question raised in this article will be answered: can a work of literature which expresses falsehood be truly beautiful?

But before continuing, it should be noted that literature is the most intellectual of all the fine arts because of the medium which it uses—language—which is the universal medium among men for expressing and communicating thought. Words are signs of concepts, but our minds do not advert normally to concepts but to things. We leap directly from words to things. Because of this power of words, no other fine art can convey truth in all its manifold aspects so clearly as literature. This ability of literature, therefore, to evoke concepts and images of things, should give some preliminary indication of its obligation to represent truth.

### III THE NOTION OF BEAUTY

Beauty is defined most briefly, adequately, and pregnantly by St. Thomas as “. . . something pleasant to apprehend.”<sup>5</sup> Again he says, “. . . beautiful things are those which please when seen.”<sup>6</sup> In these definitions there are two notions which are essential to the idea of beauty: apprehension or perception, and pleasure or delight. A beautiful thing implies a relation to a mind which delights in the perception of the thing. The splendor of a beautiful thing shines into the mind and rejoices the mind. The intellect perceives the beauty and rests in satisfaction as the intellect contemplates this beauty. Every beautiful thing, therefore, is both true and good: true by its relation to the intellect, good by its relation to the will.

According to St. Thomas, however, beauty is a type of goodness and like goodness has the notion of desirability, for the “. . . good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms desire.”<sup>7</sup> But beauty adds to the notion of goodness “. . . a relation to the cognitive faculty: so that *good* means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the *beautiful* is something pleasant to apprehend.”<sup>8</sup>

The distinguishing feature of beauty then is its relation to the cognitive power, to the intellect, and this notion is the key to unlock

<sup>5</sup> I IIae, 27, 1, ad 3um.

<sup>6</sup> I, 5, 4, ad 1um.

<sup>7</sup> I IIae, 27, 1, ad 3um.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

the answer to our question: can a false work of literature be beautiful? For if beauty implies a relation to the intellect, if beauty must be known to be enjoyed, every beautiful thing must also be true. And the reason is that the object of the intellect is truth. The intellect is naturally inclined to truth and cannot delight in falsehood.

Now a true thing is a being—something that is—conceived of as related to an intellect. It is a being known and measured by a mind. If the being known is something in nature, it is measured by the mind of God, its Creator. If the being known is a work of art, it is measured by the mind of the artist, its maker. In other words, if a natural or artificial thing is true, it has all of the perfection which its creator or maker intended to give it. In this sense a lake can be called true and not a mirage, and a statue can be called true and not false. The lake is real water; the statue has the form which the artist conceived in his mind.

But a being, a thing that is, can be called true in still another sense, in the sense of measuring the mind of a creature that depends on it for knowledge. Insofar as it causes truth in a finite mind, in the mind of a creature, it is called true.

There are, accordingly, two ways in which a beautiful thing can be said to be true, to have ontological truth or the truth of being:

1. when the thing is measured by the mind of its maker, when it possesses all of the perfection which its maker intended.
2. when the thing measures a finite mind, when it causes truth in a mind which depends on the thing for knowledge.

A work of literature must be true in both of these senses, but in addition it must have another kind of truth—truth of subject matter—which will be treated later.

Beautiful things have a special kind of truth and goodness which distinguish them from ordinary things. St. Thomas has reduced this special truth and goodness to three properties, or objective conditions, or qualities:

. . . beauty includes three conditions, *integrity* or *perfection*, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due *proportion* or *harmony*; and lastly, *brightness* or *clarity*, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright colour.<sup>9</sup>

These three properties are the causes of esthetic delight.

Integrity or perfection implies that the thing of beauty has all of the being it should have, that it has evolved to its ultimate goal of perfection, that it is finally complete in goodness. But here an impor-

<sup>9</sup> I, 39, 8.



tant distinction is necessary. The integrity of a work of art must be considered in relation to the end of the work. The artist's purpose may require him to suppress some phases of the things he is representing and bring out others. Furthermore, the integrity of a part must be considered in relation to the whole. A part by itself may represent something imperfect, even ugly, as for example, a vicious character in a drama or a grotesque statue on a cathedral. But the vicious or grotesque is beautiful in its proper place in the whole work and is even beautiful in itself. For it has all the being which it should have; it is perfect and complete in its kind. Thus Iago is a perfect villain, and a chimera on Notre Dame de Paris is a perfect monster. Both suit the end of their author and have a place in the larger work of art of which they are a part.

The second property of beauty—proportion or harmony—means that the thing of beauty is revealed to the mind as one whole having an order of parts proper to its nature. This property is likewise determined by the end or purpose of the thing. Every part in a perfect work of art is in its place according to the end which the artist conceives, and the happy relation of parts in the whole can be apprehended only in view of this end. Otherwise the beauty of the work will be lost to the beholder. Our minds desire both order and variety. The end of the work, of course, determines the order which the artist will impose on the various elements which he selects for representation. These elements naturally cannot all be equally important or equally beautiful. Some may even be grotesque or evil, like the chimera or the villain. Vice may enhance virtue in a story, or it may be necessary to provide conflict and start the plot moving. Viewed in relation to the whole and to its unifying purpose, the ugliness represented in an individual part is seen as appropriate and beautiful.

Proportion or harmony in a beautiful thing is especially stressed by St. Thomas, and as unity in variety has been accepted by nearly all writers on beauty. Some even consider it the exclusive property of beauty.<sup>10</sup> But in the Thomistic view, splendor of form is more fundamental. For form in all things is the determining principle of intelligibility.

And here an error must be avoided. The form in question is not merely the pleasing proportion of line and surface which is the common notion of form and which is found in trees, animals, men, statues, buildings, etc. It can be any form which displays effulgence or

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<sup>10</sup> Leonard Callahan, O.P., *A Theory of Esthetic according to the principles of St. Thomas*, Washington (Catholic University Dissertation), 1927, pp. 60-61.

splendor. It can be color or sound as well as line and surface. In fact color is the example of a shining form given by St. Thomas.<sup>11</sup> The color of a sunset or of the sea obviously attracts the eye as beautiful, whether seen in nature or in a painting. In the same way the harmonious relations of tones in a melody or of rhyme and meter in a poem please the ear. "Splendor of form" is a much broader notion than the beauty of line and surface with which we are so familiar in nature and art.

The form which shines forth in a thing of beauty is a determining, positive principle of being which orders the variety of matter which the artist works on. It gives unity to this diversity and thus arises proportion. It completes and enriches and thus arises integrity or perfection. It gives the luminous intelligibility which is the root of beauty. It is the reality which upon apprehension delights the intellect and rests the will.

The three properties of beauty are succinctly summarized and elucidated by Jacques Maritain:

integrity, because the mind likes being; proportion, because the mind likes order and likes unity; lastly and above all brightness or clarity, because the mind likes light and intelligibility.<sup>12</sup>

In a recent work<sup>13</sup> Father Jordan Aumann, O.P., has defined beauty thus: "The perfection of being shining through order and delighting in apprehension." (*"Perfectio entis resplendens ordine et per apprehensionem delectans."*) This definition compactly expresses the Thomistic doctrine of beauty: the three properties of beauty and the relation of a beautiful thing to the intellect and will.

That a beautiful thing must be true should now be fairly clear. But before a conclusion can be drawn from the Thomistic doctrine on beauty, the manner of representation of beauty in a work of art must be considered. And this consideration involves the much mooted question of art as imitation.

#### IV ART AS IMITATION

The purpose of playing, says Hamlet, is "... to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."<sup>14</sup> This happy statement of the purpose of

<sup>11</sup> I, 39, 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Art and Scholasticism with other Essays*, New York (Scribner's), 1936, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> *De Pulchritudine, Inquisitio Philosophico-Theologica, Dissertatio ad Lauream in Facultate Theologica Sancti Stephani Salmanticensis*, Valencia (Tipografia Moderna), 1951, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> *Hamlet*, III, 2.



the drama applies also to all other species of fine art. It is a classic expression of the Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine of art as imitation. For all art seeks to hold the mirror up to nature.

Basic to the idea of art as imitation, of course, is the distinction between the natural and artificial orders. Nature (creation, the cosmos) is the work of God, art the work of man. The work of art imitates or represents nature. It is a sign of something in nature.

The authorities agree that when St. Thomas and Aristotle say that art imitates nature, they do not mean that art slavishly copies nature, that it reproduces nature exactly.<sup>15</sup> They mean that the virtue of art directs the intellect to imitate the operations of nature: "... art in its work imitates nature. . . ."<sup>16</sup> As nature is the image of some splendor of the Holy Trinity, so is the work of art the image of some splendor in nature. And as nature molds and shapes the potency of matter, so does the virtue of art mold and shape the subject matter and the medium of art.

Art then is free and God-like in its operation. It is creative in a certain sense. From this fact the Thomistic doctrine on the formal aspect of art logically follows. As Jacques Maritain so compactly and lucidly puts it, the formal object of art is "... not a thing to which to conform, but a thing to form."<sup>17</sup> Although the artist draws his inspiration from nature, what he does is to make a new creature, metaphorically speaking. He imposes a new and ideal form on his medium. He does this first by abstracting, by selecting some phase or aspect of nature (in poetry it is primarily some aspect of human nature). Then he concentrates on this aspect, or form, which his intellect has apprehended, and he expresses it in an artistic medium (in poetry, language). He heightens, he idealizes. The result is a new form, an esthetic or artistic form, not an exact reduplication of a natural form.<sup>18</sup> And yet the new form represents the original, the

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<sup>15</sup> Callahan, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99; Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 65; Anthony Durand, *Shelley on the Nature of Poetry*, in *Laval Theologique et Philosophique*, vol. IV, 1 and 2; (1948); 1, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> I, 117, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *op. cit.*, n. 173.

<sup>18</sup> "What is required is not that the representation shall conform exactly to a given reality, but that through the material elements of the beauty of the work there shall be transmitted, sovereign and entire, the brilliance of a form—of a form, and therefore of *some truth*. . . . if the joy produced by a work of beauty proceeds from *some truth*, it does not proceed from the truth of *imitation as a reproduction of things*, it proceeds from the perfection with which the work expresses or manifests form, in the metaphysical sense of the word, it proceeds from the truth of *imitation as manifestation of a form*." J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

form in nature. It leads the mind to the natural form. It exposes and expresses the perfection, the intelligible, ontological heart of something in nature or of some phase of it. Thus Keats emphasizes the fruitful warmth of the fall in his "Ode to Autumn." He idealizes, painting autumnal scenes such as no one has ever seen or ever will see but which are highly pleasing because of their splendor of form. Thus we apprehend an ontological perfection and delight in its very apprehension.

We enjoy idealized imitation because in it we contemplate the original, learning that it is so and so,<sup>19</sup> and because we see it freed from imperfection or from unpleasant conditions. We see it with new *integrity, order, intelligibility*. For this reason we take pleasure in the imitation even of things which in reality are painful or disgusting, like death, vice, or dead bodies.<sup>20</sup>

That art in general and especially poetry is no mere slavish, dexterous copy of nature is certainly implicit in what Aristotle has to say about probability. The poet, he says, represents what might happen, the historian describes what has happened.

Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.<sup>21</sup>

If the poet has a divine, creative power, a freedom to impose new forms on his material, to soar into ideal, imaginative heights, is he therefore absolutely free to disregard the realities of the earth on which he lives and to invent forms without any relation to the common experience of humanity? By no means! For the material aspect of art demands that art be a sign, that it represent something we know, that it conform to the laws of the universe in which it exists, upon which it depends, from which it draws. The poet especially has an obligation to be faithful to nature, for according to Aristotle, poets imitate the action of men: "The objects the imitator represents are actions with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad men."<sup>22</sup> If the actions of men are the objects of poetic imitation, then obviously poetical works must represent men as they really are. Poetry describes probabilities, deals in universals, shows ". . . what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do. . . ." <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, IV, 1448b, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Poetics*, IX, 1451b, 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Poetics*, II, 1448a.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 1451b.

## V CONCLUSION

What now of Hardy and Housman and the other narrators and singers of the emptiness and disorder of the universe? What of the despairing fatalism of *Jude the Obscure*? What of the snarling materialism of *Studs Lonigan*?

The answer to the question, "Can a lie be truly beautiful?" is now obvious. NO! The reasoning on which this answer is based is in summary:

Literature is a sign, a representation.

A sign, a representation is judged by the thing signified or represented.

The thing represented in literature is life.

Literature is judged by life.

Literature, then, must conform to the facts of the universe in which man lives. For man is the author of literature and at the same time its principal object. To be great, to be truly beautiful to give the highest delight, literature must be absolutely true materially, that is, in the subject which it treats and in the way it treats this subject. No deviation can be admitted in literature from the moral, psychological laws that govern the universe. Literature must represent man as a creature, as a rational animal with an immortal soul, and as a moral and social being subject to the eternal law of God, whose end will consequently be eternal happiness or misery. History must be viewed as guided by Divine Providence and as having three high lights or foci: the creation and fall of man, the Redemptive Incarnation of Our Lord, and the Last Judgment. Thus in literature there must be presented a correct view of human nature, of society, and of the dependence of both on God. The all important rôle of grace in human life cannot be ignored.

If these truths are omitted or positively denied in a work where they belong, as they do in any novel but do not necessarily in a short, descriptive lyric, the mind cannot take pleasure in the thing represented. For the object of the mind is things as they are truly in nature, and the desire of the mind is to be united to things as they truly are. If falsity is presented to the mind in literature, the intellect and will cannot exult in the splendor of truth. Therefore a materialistic, atheistic literature, or a literature of despair, cannot be absolutely beautiful. For they nauseate the mind.

Although the beauty of any work of art is in relation to the end of the artist and the truth of a work of art is measured by the mind of the artist, nevertheless his mind in order to possess the truth and be able to express it must be measured by nature and ulti-

mately by the mind of God. Thus the truth of a work of art refers back through the mind of the artist and through nature, ultimately to the Divine Mind.

If literature has this material truth, the widest possible freedom in form cannot make it untrue. The supernatural, the fantastic, even the impossible is allowable in a story, provided that what happens is probable—that is, consistent with the laws governing the world in which we live and with the conditions which the writer lays down. He may write about angels, fairies, men, or animals that speak like men, but if he does, these characters must be convincing. They must act as they naturally would under the circumstances in which they are presented. Aristotle insists that “a likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.”<sup>24</sup>

In other words, we are willing to suspend disbelief, grant any artistic conventions necessary to the poet, go any lengths in make believe, provided something significant and true is said. But we cannot accept emptiness and falsity. We will allow a magician-knight of green complexion, armed in green, riding on a green horse who, when decapitated, can depart carrying his head in his hand. Or we will accept the transparent disguise convention of Shakespeare according to which a woman dressed as a boy cannot be recognized even by her own husband or brother. We will even vastly prefer that the characters of a play speak in rhyme, blank verse, or polished prose, rather than that they speak as we ordinarily do. For we desire to be lifted above our imperfections and limitations. But these conventional forms which we rejoice to accept, must convey some noble ideal of conduct, must say something true about human passions, vice, or virtue. For “beauty is the special quality of concentrated truth.”<sup>25</sup>

The poet concentrates truth by idealizing. He conceives an ideal form which he derives from nature. Let us call this an ontological form. It begets artistic forms. It determines the form which his poem will take. It determines the words through which it will be expressed and the way in which they will be arranged — whether in prose, blank verse, or rhyme. Thus the work of literature is begotten and born. It is the offspring of the marriage between the mind of the poet and nature. Through it the splendor of some ontological form shines forth, but at the same time the splendor of the work itself, of the medium and of its artistic form is apprehended. In a perfect work of literature both the ontological and artistic forms are enjoyed as one.

<sup>24</sup> *Poetics*, XXIV, 1460a, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Albert J. Steiss, “Outlines of a Philosophy of Art,” *The Thomist*, II no. 1 (January, 1940), p. 29.

We do not separate the thought content from its expression. The two are distinguishable but inseparable, for a great work of literature is an organic unity. The thought is to the medium almost as the soul is to the body.

For example, let us consider just two aspects of *The Divine Comedy*, which is an allegory of the journey of the soul towards God:

1.) Our constant awareness throughout the poem of the light of the Holy Trinity, from the first distant glimmer of it in the dark forest of this life, through hell (where its absence is constantly suggested), on up the mount of purgatory to the blinding brilliance of the beatific vision in paradise.

2.) How this dominant, unifying conception, the light of the Holy Trinity, of the Three in One, influenced Dante in the external structure of his poem:

First, in the division into books and cantos. There are three books making up one poem; the last two books each contain thirty-three cantos, but one more is added in the first book to round a perfect one hundred in the whole poem.

Second, in the rhyme scheme. The poem is rhymed in interlocking triads: *aba bcb cdc*, etc. Since the middle rhyme in each triad becomes the dominant rhyme in the next, this scheme laces the lines of the poem together into a tight unity.

Thus the idea of Unity in Trinity is omnipresent in *The Divine Comedy*. As one of the masterpieces of all times, this poem illustrates how supreme literature treats the greatest subject, contains the profoundest truth, and as a result of this truth has the most splendid form. Truly great literature has the most perfect, appropriate execution—the greatest integrity, proportion, and splendor of form in expression—making the splendor of the subject matter shine forth. Both depth of truth and perfection of expression are necessary to a great literary work. The more profound the truth and the more perfect the expression, the greater will be the work of literature.

If this is true, then a literature of fatalism, despair, blasphemy cannot be truly beautiful, no matter how perfect its form, for it has nothing to say that can please a sound mind. It is a glorification of nothing: No God, no providence, no ruling power but only fate; in the universe no order, no cosmos but only chaos; in man no reason which governs passion, no true knowledge, no free will, no moral responsibility; in society no rational law, no justice, but only avarice, passion, chance. In everything, nothing. And out of nothing, nothing is made: disorder.

Well, if this be so, how can such literature please at all? And

please it must in some way, for it endures. It can please only in an imperfect, limited way.

First, it can please by some partial truth artistically expressed in a work which is in error as a whole. As for example a description of nature in a pessimistic poem or the representation of passion in a naturalistic novel. When abstracted from the whole, this part may be beautiful, but the work as a whole is not, and even the part is not when seen in relation to the other parts of the erroneous whole.

Second, a false work of literature may be considered beautiful in a way on account of its perfection of style. If the style is appropriate to the author's aim, perfectly fits his end, the work has truth of a sort, for it is measured by the mind of its maker. But his mind, it should be remembered, must be measured by natural objects and ultimately by God in order to have logical truth.

Finally, a false work of literature can be viewed as true and therefore as beautiful on account of the error or ignorance of the reader. Obviously under such conditions it can even give intense esthetic delight. But then the work itself is not truly beautiful but only apparently so, just as the good proposed to the will in sin is not a true good but only an apparent one.

Therefore a work of literature that presents a falsehood cannot be absolutely beautiful, but only partially or imperfectly beautiful. The false as false, at least in literature, cannot be truly beautiful. A falsehood perfectly executed, a state of cosmic disorder, a chaos expressed through perfect artistic order is a monstrosity, not a great work of literature.