

THE "POETICIZATION" OF POSTMODERN SOCIETY

Joseph Jacobs

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
in the Graduate Studies Department of
University of Southern Indiana

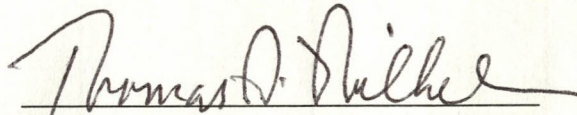
April, 1996

Acceptance page

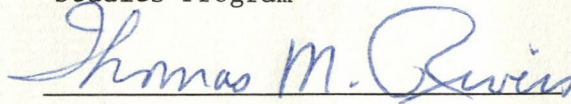
Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, University of
Southern Indiana, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies.

(Affix signatures below)

(Name and university title typed)



Dr. Thomas A. Wilhelmus
Associate Dean of the School of
Liberal Arts; Professor of English;
Director, Master of Arts in Liberal
Studies Program



Dr. Thomas M. Rivers
Professor of English

Mr. Augustine J. Fredrich
Associate Dean of the School of
Science & Engineering Technology;
Chairperson, Engineering Technology
Department; Professor of Civil
Engineering Department

(Two of three signatures required)

Abstract

Jacobs, Joseph G., M.A.L.S., University of Southern Indiana, May, 1996. The "Poeticization" of Postmodern Society. Major Professor: Dr. Thomas Wilhelmus.

The twentieth century has brought changes to human culture that far surpass any witnessed in all the millennia of past human history. Led mostly by science and technology, the result of modernity has been an advance of all aspects of human knowledge and a revision of human culture as modern individuals have tried to learn how to coexist in a dangerous world made ever smaller by electronic communications and global economic interdependence.

In this paper I will attempt to examine some of the ways modern thinkers have tried to address the ethical problems caused by the "revaluation of all values" (to paraphrase Nietzsche) that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to show how a private traditionalism can coexist with a public relativism and skepticism as a postmodern response to the modernist dilemmas. The conclusion that I hope to support is that values, while ultimately not subject to official sanction, are also not a matter of absolute individual choice. The consequences of acting on personal preferences need to be

considered interpersonally and neither "absolutely" nor--in either the religious or secular sense--"finally." For responsible decision-making to take place, therefore, projected actions and attitudes need to be modeled aesthetically in ways that educate the will as well as the intellect.

Table of Contents

Acceptance Page	ii
Abstract	iii
The Poeticization of Truth	1
The Purpose of Art	7
Literature as Moral Education	11
Works Cited	21

The Poeticization of Truth

We often find in daily living that values that are non-traditional, such as unconventional religious practices or work habits, appear to be opposite to those we find "self-evident" or "common-sensical." Values such as these are irrelevant to us in not fulfilling a function in our immediate or quasi-immediate lives. When our circumstances change or when we find ourselves confronted with another's conflicting personality, we may have difficulties that an historical understanding might have avoided (e.g. knowing that an African tribesman or unemployed ex-Communist had little opportunity to "accept Jesus," or, for that matter, "learn the value of a dollar.")

Epistemological presuppositions also cause troubles that an understanding of the "contingency" (to paraphrase Richard Rorty) of value judgements might alleviate. For example, "family values," self-evident to conservatives but not to liberals, are manifested as "laws of nature" (Locke 401) which mysteriously predate and preempt human agency. When natural law is relativized by materialistic theorizing or philosophical "de-divinization" (Rorty 21), values which depend on such frameworks for legitimacy lose their authority. The resulting problem, as Wayne Booth observes, "is partly the ancient one of not knowing when to be

skeptical and when not to be, when to say no and when to say yes" (7). But, Booth continues, the ancient problem is compounded by new circumstances: "...we have lost our faith in the very possibility of finding a rational path through any thicket that includes what we call value judgments" . When the ground of "self-evident" truths such as the Constitutional claims that "all men are created equal" or "all men are endowed with inalienable rights..." are relativized by, for example, empirical science, the hope for a just society comes to seem utopian at best.

Postmodernism is in part a reaction against the rationalized empiricism of the Enlightenment--a prominent feature of which was the "self-evidence" (or "common sense") of moral truths congenial to propertied members of liberal democracies. As Richard Rorty suggests in chapter one of Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, the romantic conception of truth as utopian social justice served, in the nineteenth century, as a counterweight to the more sober-minded view, favored by the Enlightenment, of truth as conformance to the facts of nature. Richard Rorty regards the French Revolution as the turning point in the West when "the idea that truth was made rather than found began to take hold of the imagination of Europe" (3). The artist and the politician, rather than the priest, philosopher or scientist assume a new status since, in the new paradigm "questions of ends as

opposed to means--questions about how to give a sense to one's own life or that of one's community--are questions for art or politics, or both, rather than for religion, philosophy, or science" (3).

Rorty sees in this development the seeds of a "redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be 'poeticized' rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be 'rationalized' or 'scientized' " (53). Rorty's belief that, in politics, ends precede--or should precede--means, leads him to formulate a Wittgensteinian conception of logos as a tool: something which, like Wittgenstein's famous ladder, can be thrown away when it becomes a hindrance to poetical self-transcendence (97). As a corrective to the "Plato-Kant canon" (96) which favored logos over inspiration, Rorty insists that "we need to substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace 'passion' or fantasy with 'reason' " (53). In a culture such as the one proposed by Rorty, sympathetic tolerance rather than intolerant exclusivity would be normal.

Very little of value or about value can be taught by the use of historical example or universalistic ethical training; most value is imputed to historical events and biographies after the fact, when the consequences of

historical events are known. This value-laden "redescription" of history is a consequence of the intrinsically non-teleological nature of history. Richard Rorty, explaining the importance of contingency in the unfolding of human history, says that "Christianity did not know that its purpose was the alleviation of cruelty, Newton did not know that his purpose was modern technology, the Romantic poets did not know that their purpose was to contribute to the development of an ethical consciousness suitable for the culture of Political liberalism. But we now know these things" (55-56). Rorty's point is that the groundwork for the consequences of the actions of Christianity, Newton, and the Romantic poets was laid by such people. Their greatness, however, didn't depend on their private work but rather on historical accidents that caused their work to seem earth-shaking in retrospect.

What Christianity, Newton, and the Romantic poets did was to redefine the world in ways that, by chance, became the familiar world of kindness, modern technology, and social justice we take for granted. As factual history, these stories are of little value: Jesus walked the Earth about 2000 years ago, Newton invented the Calculus, and the romantics celebrated the individual self. But, as interpreted history, interpreted in light of their consequences, historical narratives model such moral lessons

as "human progress is the result of constant work" and "good attitudes and good characters will create social justice and sometimes even happiness."

As the writing of Booth, Rorty, and other postmodern writers suggests, the "fact-value split" that has pervaded western thought for the past two-hundred years or so cannot be undone any more than Descartes or the atom bomb can be unwritten or uninvented. We are left with the option of adapting or dying by embracing the reality that our history and accidental circumstances have brought about. In a post-Darwinian, post-Freudian age this claim cannot be easily refuted. Many, if not most, inhabitants of advanced twentieth-century civilizations believe in biological determinism and ruefully accept the subjugation to material existence that freedom from the superstitions and mystical dogma of ancient religions implies. Such an understanding may suggest a determinism in human affairs that absolves individuals of ethical responsibility as well as an ethical subjectivism that tends toward existential meaninglessness and normative arbitrariness. Postmodernist philosophers, however, steeped in the fallout of scientismic skepticism of the sort described by Wayne Booth in Modern Dogmas and the Rhetoric of Assent, suggest that an attitude of ironic faith--or, in Booth's terms, "rhetorical assent"--is more prudent and desirable than a categorical denial of modern

science and culture.

Such a faith resembles the belief in the "reality" of art and literature more than the blind assent traditionally expected of religious doctrines and institutions. Though grounded in nothing more than the conscious will and desire of the individual, a deliberate "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge 306) may be as necessary to the human organism, qua human, as other apparently irrational actions, such as regular eating and breathing, are to the organism, qua organism. But mental processes, like organic ones, must have substantial content with which to work and the substance of mental processes is reason and feeling rather than food and air. This is the realm of education and socialization and an important part of such education that is often overlooked in a secular materialistic society is the education of the soul (in the worldly sense if not the religious one). The arts are uniquely suited to such a role in a pluralistic and tolerant society such as that of modern America but caution is as necessary in this as in any other sort of education that such education is neither mere entertainment nor mere political indoctrination; or, to put the matter in terms that Nietzsche might endorse, neither "art for art's sake" nor "art for morality's sake" should be the predominant paradigm of artistic education.

The Purpose of Art

Friedrich Nietzsche, in Twilight of the Idols, says of the "art for art's sake" perspective that "[t]he fight against purpose in art is always a fight against the moralizing tendency in art, against its subordination to morality. L'art pour l'art means, 'The devil take morality!'" (529). In what may be an example of what Rorty calls his "inverted Platonism" (43), Nietzsche categorically ascribes anti-moralistic motives to those who try to assert that art has intrinsic value as art but says that, without moral utility, "it still does not follow by any means that art is altogether purposeless, aimless, senseless." Unlike the Socrates of book ten of Plato's Republic, Nietzsche privileges art as "the great stimulus to life." Socrates denies that art is anything more than an imitation of unreality--a third hand copy of "true existence" (667). Nietzsche rejects Socrates's description of art as a mere copy of true virtue by claiming that, rather than cheapen virtue by imitation, the tragic artist "honors...with the greatest honors" the "state without fear in the face of the fearful and questionable that he is showing" and glorifies "[c]ourage and freedom of feeling before a powerful enemy, before a sublime calamity, before a problem that arouses dread" (530).

John Crowe Ransom may be taking a cue from Nietzsche when he says in "Art Needs a Little Separating" that "[a]pologists do their art no service in seeking to exempt it of moral and scientific responsibility" (82). Art is a peculiarly human activity and its appeal is a result of its human elements--not its formal ones. The "art for art's sake" perspective risks being at best pretentious and at worst deceptive since nobody, excepting critics, cares deeply about any particular work of art as a mere object; the art object must stand in some relation to human psychological life to be worth caring about. Borrowing terminology from John Dewey, Ransom says that a work of art "[c]learly...carries a hypothesis about what nature is like, and what standard or causal sequences seem to obtain in our human reckoning of nature. In this sense the artwork is a utility, and its moral and technological values are eligible for discussion" (82).

In Plato's Republic, Socrates does allow for "discussion" of the merits of the poet's work by the caveat that "[poetry makes] a defense of herself in lyrical or some other metre" (677). The "defense," however, would be little more than an exercise in logic because the hearer of such a defense, "fearing for the safety of the city...should make [Socrates's] words his law" (678). Against Socrates's philosophical concern with truthfulness to reality and

Nietzsche's willful celebration of tragic expression, Ransom's "hypothetical" description of the art work suggests a resolution of Socrates's "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry". Ransom says of the term "hypothesis" that it "seems to cover the whole gamble of human behavior, as we feel our way into the natural environment along the possible and practicable lines" (81). Art, then, becomes a matter of ethics as well as aesthetics when it is compared to science as a way of "hypothetically" knowing and being in the world.

Richard Rorty has likewise been influenced by Dewey's aesthetic philosophy. Rorty claims that the Socratic "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" can be decided in favor of poetry (26). Against Socratic absolutism and "exuberant Nietzschean playfulness," Rorty says that the "final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that [the ability to recognize contingency and pain] is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have. For that would be the final abjuration of the notion that truth, and not just power and pain, is to be found 'out there' " (40).

Kenneth Burke goes further than Ransom or Rorty in advocating an "art" that has a relevance as tangible as that of science. In the conclusion to part one of Permanence an

Change, he writes that "[t]he corrective of the scientific rationalization would seem necessarily to be a rationale of art--not however, a performer's art, not a specialist's art for some to produce and many to observe, but an art in its widest aspects, an art of living" (65). The word "art" has by now far exceeded its conventional meaning to the extent that Wayne Booth can say of Burke's statement that "...his views are so comprehensive and his tactics so diverse that one might just as well argue that he is capturing art for a philosophy of practice, or conflating both to build an adequate 'science' of man's universe" (97).

As such examples suggest, art in the modern world is not "mere decoration" or "idle diversion." Art may well fill a role in public life left vacant by secularization and scientific demystification. Since history cannot be undone, however, the place of art in the present and future world will be as radically different from that of Socrates's Athens as modern science is from that of Aristotle. An important goal of education is socialization; and socialization is a matter of moral as well as intellectual training. Therefore, the best education is that which teaches values as well as facts relevant to the "real world" for which the young are being prepared.

Literature as Moral Education

Fiction is sometimes a more efficient way to teach values than history or dialectic; lessons can be exemplified fictionally in a way that avoids the ambiguity of "real life" or the obscurity of scholasticism. To be effective, however, assent is necessary on the part of the hearer or reader of the story. In Modern Dogmas and the Rhetoric of Assent Wayne Booth shows that, despite the fictional intent of artistic creation, art should be "assented to" because of the power of art to persuade the emotions as well as the intellect: "...if I consult my experience instead of modernist abstractions about what art should or should not do, I find myself with a problem: art works change me. Sometimes they seem to be trying to change me and they fail. Sometimes they appear indifferent to what happens to me, but produce great changes anyway" (165). Booth asserts that the changes, though initially and principally emotional, were intellectual as well: "How did a young Mormon boy who had never met a 'Negro' become an active member of the NAACP? Not, you can be sure, by knowing any black people or by reading discursive arguments, but by reading works like Uncle Tom's Cabin and Lillian Smith's Strange Fruit..." (166).

The power of art to "change minds" is not a recent

discovery. The Biblical use of allegory to teach moral lessons and Socrates's recommendation of Aesopian fables for the same purpose are well known examples. Wayne Booth relates his "frankly sentimental" response to Bach's Saint Matthew Passion--an artistic creation designed to elucidate and inspire pious eighteenth-century Lutherans at Easter week religious services (122-23). Tolstoy--hardly a "mere critic"--proclaimed that "good" art is that which serves "to unite men with God and with one another" (435). (Tolstoy went so far as to call Beethoven's Choral Symphony "bad" on the basis of such criteria!) Along with the Socrates of Plato's Republic, Tolstoy understood the persuasive power of forms of expression commonly regarded as merely aesthetic.

There are so many examples of "canonical" art that serve a heuristic function in the Burkian "art of living" that a complete list, or even a sampling that does justice to a variety of human cultures, is impractical; one can only hope to exemplify the types of art forms that serve an educative function. In doing so, it might be helpful to consider the negative side of the matter: what sorts of art are inappropriate for education? In this regard Wayne Booth says that "I suspect that it is the fear of censorship, which I share, that has made modernists so reluctant to deal with the genuine rhetorical issues that art raises....How can we resist the ever-present demands for censorship, once

we have admitted that bad art can have bad effects--can in fact maim and destroy?" (167) Booth provides an answer to this question that allows for the freedom of mature adults while stressing the importance of the well-grounded socialization that makes mature and responsible freedom possible. Consistent with his thesis that "art must be seen as part of our repertoire of good reasons," Booth insists that the "simpleminded identification of judgment with censorship prevents our seeking the kind of discrimination in art that we often take for granted in argument" (167). In what may be a covert allusion to the culture of consumerism spawned by television and other mass media, Booth addresses a central problem of modern culture in pointing out that when "I think of that young man of twenty who was so readily seduced by every offer, I do not wish that a censorship board had protected him from the offers, but that in his education somewhere he could have been led to test the "reasons of art" as energetically as he felt he should the blandishments of advertisements or public orators" (167). Censorship, per se, does not solve moral problems but may in fact hinder the development of the critical judgment needed to reasonably respond to the pressures and issues faced by members of a modern liberal society.

Whatever the dangers of censorship, however, it may be that some censorship in early education may be a "necessary

evil." Art may be an effective tool for teaching, but not all art--and not all teaching. Mature guidance is still necessary to mediate between a private "art for art's sake" and a public "art as socialization." In a liberal democracy, however, draconian measures are neither desirable nor, if Booth is right about the intrinsic "reasonableness" of art, necessary.

Debates about "the canon" of cultural artifacts suitable for education are commonplace today. In modern America cultural wars are fought about the suitability of particular literary works and cosmological theories about the human condition; the debate between evolutionists and creationists is perhaps the most obvious example but many others could be noted. As a practical matter, it is unlikely that cultural conflict, whether personal or interpersonal, can be resolved by the application of particular programs or processes, either politically or privately, but the power of culture to influence attitudes, and possibly actions, is evident by noting the controversy surrounding art and literature in the Greece of Plato as well as the America of the twentieth century.

In The Republic, Socrates decries the writing of "all those poetical individuals, beginning with Homer" on the basis that such persons are "only imitators" who "copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never

reach" (666). For Socrates there is only one version of the truth and this truth preexists the poet or any other poetic agency. Socrates dismisses the poet because, as he explains, if the "honeyed muse" is admitted into the city, "pleasure and pain, rather than "law and the reason...which by common consent have been deemed the best, will rule the state" (676).

It is unclear whether Socrates's dismissal of Homer and the poets is intended as a practical step in the ordering of the state or merely as a heuristic exaggeration of the dangers of art as socialization. As his frequent literal allusions show, Socrates is aware of his debt to those who preceded him; before his dismissal of Homer he says almost apologetically that "I have always from my earliest youth had an awe and love of Homer, which even now makes the words falter on my lips, for he is the great captain and teacher of the whole of that charming tragic company" (658).

Socrates also shows an exceptional awareness of the arguments in favor of traditional learning when he warns Glaucon about "the eulogists of Homer" who declare "that he has been the educator of Hellas, and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human things, and that you should take him up again and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him..." (676). In such passages Socrates sounds ironically like the most

eloquent advocate of the viewpoint he is arguing against, suggesting further that his condemnation of Homer and the poets is merely sophistical. Whatever Plato's intentions were in writing The Republic, it is clear that the arts have long been taken very seriously as agents of socialization.

As even this brief example from The Republic shows, the Platonic dialogues and other ancient Greek texts provide models of debate and reasoned arguments as well as implicit cautions about the practical limits of reason. But ancient Greek literature is not the only source of such ethical modeling. Included among religious traditions are myths that exemplify moral debate--often by the embodiment of abstractions in legendary and mythical persons and situations. Biblical allegories, such as the stories of Adam and Eve and the tribulations of Job, exemplify human virtue and weakness in ways that are general enough to be applicable across diverse cultures. (The universality of Old Testament stories is such that Christianity, while implicitly rejecting much that culturally distinguishes Judaism, could "canonize" such texts as part of the Christian Bible.)

Besides Judaic tradition, the complex pedigree of Christianity that John Crowe Ransom calls its "paradoxical catholicity" (59) flies in the face of much that today goes by the rubric of "political correctness" in the efforts of

"civil rights advocates" to remove religious elements from public education. The Christian tradition is as humanistic as it is religious and incorporates pagan as well as sacred elements in its practice and teaching; for instance, the concept of "soul," as a non-material substance probably originated in ancient Greek or Persian cosmology and, as Ransom suggests, became central to Judaism and Christianity through the conquests of Alexander and the subsequent universalization of the Mediterranean world (60).

Conceptions such as that of an immaterial soul are neither peculiar to particular religions nor to Western European traditions. Such abstract ideas and ideals may usefully be understood as "hypotheses" in the sense suggested by Ransom. As hypotheses, Biblical narratives have as much validity as those conventionally regarded as "scientific." Even the latter, as Wayne Booth's discussion of Bertrand Russell's skepticism reveal (ch. 2), are at best probabilistic. Only in extreme cases, as in the debates between evolutionists and creationists, do either scientists or religionists assert the absolute truthfulness of their propositional claims.

As the foregoing discussion may suggest, many forms of art and literature can be effective as tools for moral education. The plays of Shakespeare, for instance, illustrate Wayne Booth's thesis that "[w]ithout art we would not know some things that through art we come to know"

(Booth 169). Though "dated" stylistically and historically by Shakespeare's language and settings, the plays reveal aspects of human psychology that lie hidden to scientific inquiry of explanation.

In Hamlet the arch villain is Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who usurps the throne of Denmark by murdering Hamlet's father and marrying his mother. In act three Hamlet happens to see Claudius praying in seclusion and debates whether to kill Claudius but decides against assassination on the grounds that killing Claudius while he prays would cause him to be sent to heaven and the murder of Hamlet's father would remain unavenged. The situation is morally ambiguous both because the "villain" (Claudius) is depicted suffering pangs of conscience because of his deed while the "hero" (Hamlet) is rationalizing his hesitation in avenging his father. In the work of a lesser playwright Claudius might be depicted as a Machiavellian hypocrite who prays to appear pious to his subjects. But Shakespeare leaves his motives unclear, causing the reader or audience member to conjecture about Claudius's real character and the motives behind his actions. The situation is further complicated by Hamlet's own indecision; he is unsure whether his destiny is to be his father's avenger or the next king of Denmark. Other examples of moral ambiguity in Shakespeare's work include the assassination of Caesar by his friends and the

misunderstanding by Lear of his daughter's love. As in life itself, the passage of time in Shakespeare's plays sometimes makes virtue of what once appeared to be folly and justice is rarely either swift or certain.

Other literature is more overtly didactic than the plays of Shakespeare. A chapter of Richard Rorty's Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity is concerned with a critique of George Orwell's 1984. For Rorty, Orwell's novel illustrates Rorty's thesis that liberal democracy did not have to become the dominant form of government in the twentieth century and--because of the arbitrariness of morality and human history--cruelty and injustice could still triumph over kindness and justice as the norm in modern industrial societies. The "central sentence of 1984," according to Rorty, is the remark by O'Brien that "[t]he object of torture is torture" (180). Rorty considers that sentence as the "analogue" for a "gifted and sensitive intellectual living in a post totalitarian culture...of 'Art for art's sake' or 'Truth for its own sake,' for torture is now the only art form and the only intellectual discipline available to such a person."

Such literature represents facets of "human being" that metaphysics or science is incapable of revealing. Fiction doesn't "lie" because fiction doesn't claim to represent "the world as it really is." Art "reflects" the worldly

image but, like a mirror, only the image is presented to the viewer, without the harshness and ambiguity of "reality." The implicit acknowledgment by the novelist or stage writer that the life of the characters is an illusory one allows the audience of his or her work to "visit" without the risk of long-term commitment or of physical or spiritual danger. In combination with the constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of the society we inhabit, morality modeled on aesthetic forms decreases the likelihood that worlds such as that envisioned by Orwell come to be actual and increases the possibility that the future of the world is inhabited by mutually caring individuals committed to an ongoing project of universal justice and peaceful cooperative existence.

Works Cited

- Booth, Wayne C. Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent.
Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974.
- Burke, Kenneth. Permanence and Change. Los Altos,
California: Hermes, 1954.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. Biographia Literaria in The
Critical Tradition: Texts and Contemporary Trends. Ed.
David H. Richter. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.
- Locke, John. Two Treatises of Government in Great Political
Thinkers: Plato to the Present. Ed. William Ebenstein.
Chicago: Holt, 1979.
- Nietzsche. The Portable Nietzsche. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New
York: Viking, 1967.
- Plato. The Portable Plato. Ed. Scott Buchanan. New York:
Viking, 1965.
- Ransom, John Crowe. Beating the Bushes: Selected Essays,
1941-1970. New York: New Directions, 1952.
- Rorty, Richard. Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. in The Complete Works of
William Shakespeare. Roslyn, New York: Walter J. Black,
Inc., 1937.

Tolstoy, Leo. "What is Art." in The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.