

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Apr '07

Nº 418



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART VIII

Questions About Art and Beauty

85. THE NATURE AND FORMS OF ART

Dear Dr. Adler,

I've read a lot of discussion about art, but it nearly always centers on such things as painting, sculpture, and music. I wonder if we can't extend the term "art" to cover a much wider area. For instance, I've seen books on "the art of cooking." Is that a correct use of the term? Would it be right to call a first-rate carpenter an "artist"?

J.V.G.

Dear J. V. G.,

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the word "art" was very broadly used to cover all forms of human skill and all the things which men were able to produce by skilled workmanship.

It is in this sense of the word that Plato and Aristotle talk about the arts and that the Roman poet Lucretius refers to the skills which Prometheus gave to man, enabling him to improve the material conditions of his life. It is in the same sense that Rousseau, centuries later, speaks of metallurgy and agriculture as the two arts which brought about the advance from primitive to civilized life. Similarly, Adam Smith, the great economist of the eighteenth century, gives us a long list of the arts involved in production of worldly goods.

Sometime during the nineteenth century, the word "art" came to be used primarily for one type of art—the so-called "fine arts." The ancients did not exclude such things as sculpture, music, and poetry from their inventory of the arts, but neither did they glorify these things as art to the exclusion of all other human productions. Their conception of art included everything that man has the skill or know-how to produce.

Nowadays most of us use the word with a very restricted meaning. In the first place, we tend to forget that art refers primarily to the skill which a man has and only secondarily to the works of art—the productions of skilled work. In the second place, we tend to identify art with the "arty" or aesthetic. Sometimes, under the head of the fine arts, we include poetry and music, but sometimes we use the word "art" even more narrowly for the things we look at in museums—paintings and sculpture.

On the other hand, we still do recognize the broader meaning of the term. We talk about the “industrial arts,” and we compliment a fine craftsman by saying that he is an artist. We indicate that we understand art as skill when we refer to the art of reading, the art of teaching, the art of healing, even though in these cases there is no material product to point to as a work of art. And when we distinguish between the artificial and the natural, we draw a line between the things which man has employed his skill to produce and everything else in the universe.

I think we would do well to return to the traditional and broad use of the term “art” to cover every form of human skill and everything that man can effect by means of skill. Then, within this broad meaning, we can distinguish different types of art and at the same time recognize what is common to all of them. In spite of their differences in quality and complexity, we would see the art in cooking and carpentry as well as the art in poetry and painting.

There are many ways of classifying the arts, but I shall mention only the most fundamental. Such arts as cooking and carpentry are called “useful” because they produce things which we employ and consume. In contrast, such arts as poetry and painting, which we call “fine,” produce objects that give us pleasure to know or contemplate. The French have a better name for these arts. They call them “beaux-arts,” signifying that they produce things of beauty to be enjoyed.

Then there are the so-called “liberal arts.” The ancients consider some arts servile and some liberal, according as the work produced is primarily material or mental. Thus a house is a work of servile art, while a poem is a work of liberal art. But so also is a science a work of liberal art. That is why such skills as those of grammar, logic, and mathematics are called liberal arts.

Finally, there are three very special arts—the arts of the farmer, the healer, and the teacher. These are set apart under the name “cooperative arts,” because here the artist merely helps nature in the productive process. There would be no shoes without shoemakers, but there would be fruits and grains without farmers. These are primarily things of nature, in the production of which the farmer tries to help nature along.

86. THE ESSENCE OF POETRY

Dear Dr. Adler,

I wonder what the essence of poetry is, what makes it different from other kinds of writing. Is it a matter of sound-values, of the tone and rhythm of syllables, words, and lines? Or does the essence of poetry lie in a certain feeling, sensitivity, or attitude toward things?

I. D. L.

Dear I. D. L.,

Most of us nowadays identify poetry with verse. For us, a poem is a writing arranged in lines having a definite rhythmical pattern, and expressing personal feelings and impressions. We distinguish poetry from prose, the language of ordinary speech and writing.

But poetry has a much wider meaning than current usage allows. The term comes from a Greek word meaning “to make.” Although, originally, poetry meant any act of human creation, it soon took on the specific meaning of literary creation. The poet as distinct from the sculptor, painter, and other artists—works with words.

Aristotle, in his famous treatise on poetry, says that poetry is an imitation of human action, expressed in language, with the aid of harmony and rhythm. By “an imitation,” he does not mean a copy of actual events, such as a tape recorder or movie camera can provide. He means a representation of the universal aspects of human experience discerned by the mind of the poet and expressed in the concrete characters, events, and dialogue that he creates.

According to this view, poetry need not necessarily be written in verse. Conceivably, Homer’s epics could have been written in prose, and works of history and science could be written in verse. The essential distinction is between the imaginary and the actual. The poet, for Aristotle, is essentially a storyteller, a mythmaker, a fiction writer.

Aristotle spends little time on lyric poetry, the kind of poetry that monopolizes our attention. He deals mainly with narrative poetry, either epic in form, like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or dramatic, like Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. For Aristotle, the particular patterns of sound and rhythm, the formal style and prosody,

are of secondary importance. The main thing for him is what the poem is about—a sequence of interrelated human actions.

Another school of critics has from earliest times emphasized the “grammatical” and “rhetorical” aspects of poetry. The Roman writer Horace, who also wrote a work on poetry, concentrates on the elements of sound, style, and verbal arrangement. The New Critics, who have been prominent in this country in recent years, belong to this ancient school of criticism. They are famous for their close analysis of the language of poems, usually lyric in form.

If we pay attention only to the substance of poetry, as Aristotle advises, we are bound to classify novels and prose-dramas as poetry. We should not be surprised, then, to hear Cervantes, Fielding, and Melville refer to themselves as poets. Indeed, contemporary reviewers of Scott’s “Waverley” novels called them poems. And we would be quite correct to call Hemingway, Faulkner, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams poets.

Critics differ down the ages as to how seriously we should take poetry. Some see poetry’s primary function as providing pleasure, relaxation, delight. That is Horace’s view. Others maintain that poetry has a moral and prophetic function, providing us with instruction as well as delight. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides, though he considers secular poetry unedifying frivolity, finds the imaginative faculty essential in religious prophecy. The Italian philosopher Vico thinks that poetry was the original form of religious expression.

Plato, however, feels so strongly about the way that poets deal with basic moral and religious truths that he bans them from his ideal community. Aristotle, as usual, takes a middle position. On the one hand, he holds that poetry provides enjoyment and a desirable emotional release. On the other, he holds that poetry provides a representation of universal aspects of existence. The poetic imagination, for Aristotle, deals with essential realities and is to be taken very seriously.

87. THE POET—CRAFTSMAN OR PROPHET?

Dear Dr. Adler,

I notice that thinkers who are rooted in the classical tradition speak of poetry as if it were one of the productive arts, and as if the poet were a skilled workman. I wonder if this is all there is to be-

ing a poet. Haven't there been times when poets were looked up to with awe, as providing us with special intuitions and insights into the heart of things? Isn't a true poet more like a prophet than a shoemaker?

T. D.

Dear T. D.,

Theories about poetry since ancient times have revolved around the notion of the poet as a deliberate craftsman, as an inspired seer, or some combination of the two. In the ancient world, the word “poetry” originally meant “making,” and included all forms of human productivity—making vases as well as making poems. But it soon came to mean the art of literary “making,” the imaginative representation of human action, character, and emotion—through words. Such “making” included dramatic works, both comedy and tragedy and epic narratives, as well as the lyrical verse to which we commonly ascribe the term “poetry.”

In the ancient sense of poetry, the use of verse patterns and rhythms by themselves did not make a literary work poetic, for works on history, science and the technical arts were often written in verse, but not regarded as poetry. They were descriptions of actuality rather than imaginative creations, which “imitated” the universal aspects of human action—the essential function of poetry, according to Aristotle.

Leaving aside the question of whether poetry can be written in prose as well as in verse, there is no doubt that we mean something special and unique by the terms “poetic” and “poet.” The ancient philosophers recognized this and tried to investigate just what this uniqueness consists of. Although the poet in the original language of Plato and Aristotle is literally a “maker,” they did not see him as identical with other makers of things—with the shoemaker, the shipwright and other artisans.

Indeed, the idea that the poet is a kind of madman or an inspired visionary comes to us from Plato. And so sober a thinker as Aristotle allows that “a strain of madness,” instead of “a happy gift of nature,” may in some cases account for a poet’s ability to stand outside of himself and enter into the personalities of his imaginary characters. What Plato and Aristotle called “madness” is equivalent to what we call “inspiration.” We should note, however, that “inspiration,” and the similar term “enthusiasm,” connoted direction by an external, supernatural force.

Jacques Maritain, a distinguished modern philosopher, has dealt in recent years with this question of whether the artist is a seer or a craftsman (of a high order). Maritain's basic theory had been that the artist or poet is a "maker," a workman similar to other makers of things, with a skill in turning out objects. But obviously there is something different about poetry, since it is a mental, rather than a manual art. It involves a unique action of the human mind.

Hence, Maritain emphasizes the element of "creative intuition" in art and poetry. By this he means a special disposition, capacity or openness to the deepest levels of the human spirit. But he insists that this is a strictly natural and human process, and he throws up his hands in horror at any pretense of the poet to be a seer possessing special insight into ultimate mysteries. He accuses modern poets, such as Poe, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, of indulging in just this presumption.

The critic Harold Rosenberg, however, retorts that these poets had no supernatural pretenses, that they were primarily technical innovators and systematizers, who tried through their own deliberate efforts to bring about the state of "inspiration" through which poetry has always been achieved. They emphasized conscious technique, devices and exercises, and tried to construct a systematic discipline for the making of poetry. The modern poet, says Rosenberg, is a sensitive technician who combines the "maker" and the "seer" in a new way.

88. THE USES OF MUSIC

Dear Dr. Adler,

The classical Greek writers, such as Plato, ascribed such virtues to music that they made it a central part of their educational curriculum. This seems so foreign to our present conception of music and its place in education that I wonder if they meant something different, or at least broader, than we do when they used the term "music." Just what did the ancient Greek thinkers mean by "music"? Did later thinkers agree with them?

W. G.

Dear W. G.,

In ancient Greece, the term *music* originally referred to all the arts presided over by the nine Muses. As a specific term, however, music meant the arts of singing and dancing, and was intimately associated with poetry and dramatic performances. For the Greek philosophers, music in this sense was a concrete expression of the order or disorder that is present in the universe and in the human soul. For them, mathematics and astronomy were musical arts too, and they talked about a music of the spheres as well as of sounds.

Music, therefore, played an important role in the Athenian program of education. As literary education cultivated the intellect, and gymnastics developed the body, so music cultivated the emotions and the moral virtues. The educational program proposed by Plato for his ideal republic assigned to music this function of moral education.

Plato argued that musical harmonies and rhythms imitate basic patterns in the universe and the soul. In his view, the growing child is influenced by the melodies he hears so that he assumes the feeling and character traits expressed by them. Certain musical modes engender grace, temperance, courage, and other virtues. Other modes induce clumsiness, intemperance, cowardice, and other vices. Thus music does for the mind what gymnastics does for the body.

“Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other,” Plato wrote, “because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful; . . . he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste . . . in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him familiar.”

Aristotle acknowledged the importance of music as a means of moral education, but he also stressed the aesthetic and psychological values of music. In his view, music is the art especially fitted to moral education because of its unique capacity to imitate moral qualities. But it is also important because it provides pleasure and relaxation and, on the higher level, intellectual enjoyment in leisure as part of a liberal education. Finally, music performs a purgative, or therapeutic function, in arousing and releasing feelings of pity, fear and enthusiasm.

Aristotle insisted that musical appreciation requires some skill in musical performance. Hence, children should be trained to play musical instruments. However, this is to be a liberal, not a professional, education in music. The students are to learn to play instruments only in order to learn what is good music and to delight in it, not to acquire the skill of a virtuoso.

Among modern philosophers, Immanuel Kant ranked music below poetry, painting and other arts, because it depends more on the play of sensations than on objective ideas and forms. He ranked music high in immediate enjoyment and agreeableness, but low on the scale of mental culture. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, on the contrary, ranked music highest among the arts for the very reason that it expresses deep realities that cannot be expressed in the other arts.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

Thank you so much for what you do. I have been enjoying some fantastic conversations with one of my high school students about *Six Great Ideas*. It is so wonderful to see a sixteen year old get excited about things that matter. He is a leader and will pass on his excitement with an irenic spirit to those in his “orbit.”

Many Blessings,

Gregg Hodge

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Wayne Wilson

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.