

MORALITY IN POETRY

THE NEW CRITICAL APPROACH

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RESUMO: O problema da moralidade na poesia permanece um problema controverso. Geralmente considerado um gênero literário tendente ao subjetivo e abstrato, é muitas vezes difícil determinar se o teor moral da poesia se encontra em seu conteúdo, sua forma, nas emoções veiculadas ou na conjunção desses fatores. Aqui este problema é examinado da forma como aparece no pensamento de críticos ligados à escola de crítica literária chamada originalmente de New Criticism. Influyente na metade do século XX, o New Criticism ficou conhecido como uma corrente que enfatizava o estudo das propriedades internas e formais do texto literário. No entanto, os autores ligados a ela tinham ideias bastante elaboradas com relação à moralidade da poesia. Aqui algumas dessas ideias são articuladas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Moralidade – poesia – New Criticism

ABSTRACT: The issue of morality in poetry is a controversial one. Generally seen as a literary genre which tends toward subjectiveness and abstraction, it is often difficult to determine whether the moral tenor of poetry is to be found in its content, its form, in the emotions conveyed, or in the connection of these elements. Here this issue is examined as it appears in the thought of critics connected to the so called New Criticism school. Influential throughout the mid-20th Century, this school was known for its emphasis on the study of internal and formal properties of the literary text. However, the authors associated to it had elaborate ideas on morality in poetry. Here some of these ideas are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Morality – poetry – New Criticism

INTRODUCTION

The issue of morality in art has always been very strong in the field of aesthetics. Nevertheless, it remains a nebulous and undecided issue. There is little doubt about the moral value and responsibility of the scientist. The artist's, on the other hand, is obscure and controversial. Where does morality appear in art? In its contents? In its form? In the artist's view on his or her subjects?

In this essay these questions will be examined in relation to one specific art, poetry. Poetry is often seen as a more abstract and vague genre in literature. Its subjects are frequently subjective or metaphysical, its compositional processes are enigmatic (mainly in modern poetry) and the ideas it conveys are seen as mysterious. Many experienced literature (prose) readers remark that they do not know how to evaluate the quality of a poem or even that there is simply no way to evaluate it, that poetry is not meant to be understood or assessed, only vaguely "felt."

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It is obvious that so vague an art would hardly survive throughout the centuries in literally all human cultures. Poetry has surely, as other arts, played a part in human culture, even if this part is not always clear. Urged by these questions, poets and critics such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and Ezra Pound set to provide more solid and objective analyses of the poetic phenomenon, spawning a group of critics questionably and somehow arbitrarily named “the new critics.” The works of this group were probably the best poetry criticism written in the 20th Century. Although these authors became known for their emphasis on the study of poetic works’ internal structure, a great deal of reflection on the moral and social responsibility and participation of poets was provided by them. This essay aims to provide a brief and general view of their reflections on these topics.

SOCIAL AND PRAGMATIC RESPONSIBILITY OF POETRY

The question of the poet’s responsibility is straightforwardly put in a 1950 essay by Allen Tate (1999) already in the title: *To whom is the poet responsible?*, asks the poet and critic. The answer he gives, though not so direct as the question, is nevertheless assertive and clear: the poet is responsible for his own conscience, for his own poetry. Tate reveals us that the poet was held responsible for much of the turbulence that shook the 20th Century in the form of wars and totalitarian governments. The road taken by poetry in modernity, it was said, had led to ill mental habits, to a breaking down of consciousness leading to those disturbances. Tate, however, counters these ideas, reminding us that “the human condition must be faced and embodied in language before men in any age can envisage the possibility of action” (p. 27), therefore, the poet’s responsibility is with human experience and its translation into language, with his craft and instrument:

The total complex of sensibility and thought, of belief and experience, in the society from which the poetry emerges, is the prime limiting factor that the poet must first of all be aware of; otherwise, his language will lack primary reality, the nexus of thing and word. (p. 27)

Tate is also highly critical of an effective participation of poets in the political life of their country or the use of their prestige as poets to hold political positions. In this sense he cites Pound, who became known for his political activities. Pound, on his turn, had a thorough view on the artist’s (specifically the poet’s) responsibility to his society and it was in touch with his particular views on what poetry was.

Pound defines literature as “language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree” (2008, p. 23). This energizing of language implies exploring its expressive possibilities and resources as much as possible. Such definition of literature is directly related to a function of literature in its society, for the *State* and its politic maintenance. When one thinks about it, it becomes clear that the health of a state is strictly contingent on the views, ideas, and systems of thought grounding it; and the functioning of these, on their turn, depends on language, on the rulers’ capacity of communication among themselves and with their people, and, finally, with other nations. In other words, the sound government of a country depends on soundness of

thought, and soundness of thought depends on soundness and clarity of language, insofar as thought must be communicated. And, finally, the one who is really responsible for the soundness and clarity of language is, after all, the writer. Pound refers to literature in general, but poetry here has a special weight. For Pound, the soundness of a society is highly dependent on the quality of its poetry.

As an attempt to contribute to the maintenance of soundness in language through poetry, Pound suggests a method for studying poetry which would be analogous to that of natural sciences: one needs to look carefully at the texts and see what is really there in terms of language resources, how the author uses language and how and to what extent this resource he or she explores can be profitable for the general language user. Pound devised a classification of three “kinds of poetry,” or, as Brazilian critic José Guilherme Merquior says with greater precision, three “dimensions of value” in poetry (Merquior, 2000, p. 38): melopœia, phanopœia, and logopœia. Melopœia, as the name suggests, is the exploration of the words’ musical properties; phanopœia is the exploration of the words’ visual properties; and logopœia, a special play with the words’ meanings and usages which Pound lyrically calls “the dance of the intellect among words” (p. 25). With these concepts and suggestions Pound tries to incite poetry critics and readers or poets with more objective and healthy reading habits.

In another essay, *The Serious Artist* (1968), Pound deepens his understanding of the artist’s responsibility. Art, for Pound, is a science as much as chemistry; its subject is men, mankind and the individual, what makes mankind what it is and in what individuals differ from each other. This is the responsibility of the artist. Art, according to Pound, is immoral inasmuch as it is bad, i.e., inaccurate art. Inaccurate art, he believes, is as criminal as an adulterated medical report, and the bad artist should be punished and despised, just as the unlawful doctor. The morality of art lies in its accuracy and faithfulness to the state of mind it is dealing with, not in its subjects. With regard to this point, Pound says that “good art however ‘immoral’ it is, is wholly a thing of virtue” (p. 44).

Tate’s and Pound’s theories on the function and responsibility of poetry are focused above all on the quality of language and its effects on a society as a whole. T. S. Eliot, in *The Social Function of Poetry* (1975) goes in the same direction, but explores these ideas with more subtlety, especially in what concerns the relation of the poet with his or her society. First of all, Eliot points out that in different periods of time poetry has had different particular functions. It would be correct to say that it has always had a religious function, as in religious hymns or even prayers, but in traditional societies it has also an incantatory-magical function; during the classical antiquity, in addition to its function as entertainment, it had also a didactic function, which is now clearly lost. However, says Eliot, there is some function which is held by poetry in all periods and all societies, and which really characterizes it as poetry.

The first function, as in any art, is giving pleasure, but besides pleasure, poetry must convey some new kind of experience or at least to provide the reader with new words to express and signify his or her previous experiences, broadening his or her vocabulary and field of consciousness. These functions, however, concern the individual, not the collectivity. For the collective dimension, Eliot agrees with Pound that poetry is destined to maintain a people’s language healthy and effective,

particularly in what concerns the emotive dimension of a language. Eliot reminds us that to *feel* in a language, more than to speak it or think in it, is the deepest degree of intimacy one can have with it. It is this capacity of thinking in one’s mother tongue that forms one’s personality, to which Eliot adds that acquiring another language is acquiring a supplementary personality. Thought can often be translated from one language into another with no loss of content, but the emotional tone exists only in that particular language. The possibility a language has to express and convey subtler and more refined nuances of emotion reflects directly in its people’s refinement or crudeness of emotions. Once a language starts decaying, losing its capacity of conveying feeling, the emotions of its speakers become progressively crude, with a consequent decadence in this people’s intellect and culture up to the point of the complete destruction of its civilization and extinction of its language.

This refined and detailed emotional dimension in language is the field in which poetry acts. The responsibility of the poet, therefore, is first of all with his language, and then, only indirectly, to his people. Moreover, Eliot reminds us that, within his language (and, therefore, people), the poet must have a broad awareness in terms of time and space. He must be aware of the evolution of his language’s resources as well as of its actualization in different social levels. The former is important because, in order to use his language the best he can in his own time, he must learn how it was used by those who used it best in previous times; the latter is important because, even if the poet will explore more refined and subtle emotions in his work, he must have something to say to all his fellow citizens, even those of lower degrees of education and culture, is he to reflect his nation’s personality in his work.

THE NEW CRITICISM AND THE MORALITY OF POETRY

Knowingly the so called New Criticism movement took its name from a book by John Crowe Ransom originally published in 1941 where he analyzes the work of three leading “new critics” as he calls them: I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, and Yvor Winters. Ransom says that this new criticism, “in depth and precision at once it is beyond all earlier criticism in our language” (1979, p. x). Ransom also points out two problems of this new tendency, one associated to the use of psychological vocabulary and the other described as “plain moralism, which in the new criticism would indicate that it has not emancipated itself from the old criticism” (p. xi), pointing Yvor Winters as particularly affected by it. Ultimately, Ransom supported a “criticism of the structural properties of poetry” (p. xi), since these properties were what defines poetry as something different from other phenomena.

The link between morality and literature is indeed frequently touched upon by the new critics, at least in those studied by Ransom. Interestingly enough, these three writers, in spite of their similarities regarding critical discipline, present quite different ontological bases, which could but affect their views on morals. Concerning ontology, we have a marked opposition between Richards’s materialistic psychological view and Eliot’s and Winters’s, which are (even if in different ways) based on religious ideas.

Ransom reprehends in Richards his “long and faithful [...] devotion to neurological psychology” (p. 12) and his uncritical admiration of the hard sciences and their methods. Indeed, studying his main work, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (2001), originally published in 1924, one is impressed by the predominance of psychological and neurological ideas in his views on aesthetics. Early on, Richards states that the difference between aesthetic experience and other kinds of experience is in the “connections of their constituents” (p. 12), therefore, there is no such thing as an autonomous aesthetic mode that accounts for aesthetic experience, and criticism would be fine if it could leave out mystic entities and explanations.

Art is, for Richards, first and foremost concerned with communication. He does not neglect subjective or unconscious elements in the writing of a poem or the production of any art object, but he clearly states that these elements are unfathomable, and the elements which give a work of art its validity are especially those based on which a common experience can be shared; in other words, those elements which may enable a communication of experiences. Arts are “our storehouse of recorded values” (p. 27). Human ethical development is based on the comparison of experiences and their values in order to choose experiences to be favored, and without the help of the arts, very few experiences could be compared, and obviously the most recondite and complex would be left out, due to the difficulty of communicating them. The skilled artist is the one who succeeds in communicating those experiences, enlarging our repertoire of known experiences and, then, of values.

In the arts we find the records in the only form in which these things can be recorded of the experiences which have seemed worth having to the most sensitive and discriminating persons. (p.27-28)

In this system of arts and morals, the critic, Richard believes, “is as much concerned with the health of the mind as any doctor with the health of the body” (p. 54), a simile close to that of Pound: “it is important for the purpose of thought to keep language efficient as it is in surgery to keep tetanus bacilli out of one’s bandages” (2008, p. 23). The notion that poetry is connected to the health of a culture is very pervasive in these critics.

It is obvious that this psychological-neurological view was not shared by the Anglo-Catholic Eliot. Ransom remarks that Eliot’s religious views are not embedded in his criticism, that he maintained a good degree of neutrality when writing criticism. Some of Eliot’s doctrine on the function of literature was sketched above and, as we could see, no religious arguments were used. However, one should remark that in the essay mentioned above, *The Social Function of Poetry*, Eliot states that his objective is to trace the function poetry has and has had throughout the centuries in all human cultures. When talking about the function of literature in Europe or the broader Western world, the place of religion is strongly ascertained.

In his often quoted essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1975), Eliot says that what gives an artist his true individuality is not his dissimilarities with his predecessors, but actually his similarities. Individual talent is not at odds with tradition; in fact, it is a direct result from or part of it. True individuality rises from tradition. In a less well-known article, *Religion and literature* (1975), Eliot criticizes the liberal view

that “if everybody says what he thinks, and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic compensation and adjustment, come right in the end” (p. 103). Indeed, Eliot’s view of individuality was opposed to that of democratic liberalism. One could only be an individual in the context of a millenary tradition, and this tradition was, according to Eliot, the Christian tradition.

His famous quote, “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality,” in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* can be sometimes misleading. For Eliot, artistic development requires a depersonalization, an extinction of personality, and an absorption of the artist into his or her tradition. Poetic construction is successful, first of all, through the employment of what Eliot termed “objective correlative,” a series of objects and images, which, in the poem, would replace, or symbolize, a certain quality of emotion. Eliot does not say that a poet should not rely on his own emotions and subjective experiences in the writing of his poems, but he reminds us that the poet has to deal with these emotions and experiences as objectively as possible. There should be no difference for a poet between writing from his own experiences or those of others, since these materials would go through the filter of tradition, more than the poet’s personality, and they would be dealt with by a set of impersonal structures. The poem, then, becomes an entirely different thing from the experiences and emotions that first inspired it.

From all the critics studied by Ransom (and possibly among all the critics of this generation), Yvor Winters is the one most directly interested in the relations between morality and poetry. His interest in morality is, as we have already seen, reprehended by Ransom. In the foreword to his big collection of essays *In Defense of Reason* (2011), Winters classifies literary theories in didactic, hedonistic, and romantic theories, to which he adds a fourth heading, the moralistic, with which he sympathizes. Didactic theories, according to him, are also preoccupied with a moralistic dimension of literature; however, says Winters, this kind of theories is interested in literature as providing explicit moral instruction, and Winters believes that this task may be better accomplished by religion or ethics, instead of literature. Curiously, not only those theories which see pleasure as the objective of literature are classified as hedonistic, but also those which see the poem as a reality in itself, detached from any outer reality; Winters classifies T. S. Eliot as a theoretician in this tradition, and Winters, in avoiding this approach, detaches himself a great deal from what is usually identified as New Criticism. Romantic theories are individualistic-subjectivist theories. Finally Winters defines the theory he defends as absolutist. The work of literature, for Winters, “approximates a real apprehension and communication of a particular kind of objective truth” (p. 11). In the end of the foreword, Winters also admits the theism implicit in his absolutist theory, although he observes that “my critical and moral notions are derived from the observation of literature and of life, and that my theism is derived from my critical and moral notions” (p. 14).

In the opening article to this collection, adequately titled *The Morality of Poetry*, Winters states that the aim of a poem can be considered, to the reader, to offer new perceptions; while for the poet, it is a training of his sensibilities:

The very exigencies of the medium as he employs it in the act of perception should force him to the discovery of values which he never would have found without the convening of all the conditions of that particular act [...] (p. 17)

The conditions to which Winters is referring are the formal parameters which guide the composition of a poem (meter, rhyme etc). Here we have the sketching of an important notion: the poetic message (the emotion, or idea the poet wants to convey) is heavily influenced or even partly determined by the formal resources; poetry is not the rendering of a mental content in somewhat arbitrary formal conventions, these formal resources play an active role in the *production* of the poetic emotion which is the objective of the poem. And Winters states lapidarily that “the poet who suffers from such difficulties instead of profiting by them is only in a rather rough sense a poet at all” (p. 17). In its synthesis of words, rhymes, juxtapositions, connotations, cadences, the poem composes itself as “an almost fluid complex,” whose rhythms are “faster and more highly organized than are those of prose” (p. 19). The experience conveyed in verse is more intense and compact, thus more valuable, than in prose. For Winters, the defining quality of lyrical poetry is “the quality of transferable or generalized experience,” (p. 19) the fact that the poem is general and particular at the same time.

The poem proceeds from an inner experience of the poet, although the poem itself is quite a different experience. Now we remember that Winters criticizes the “hedonistic” theory about the poem as a completely independent existence, detached from the experience which inspired it. So, if the poem is a different experience from that inspiring experience, it is not unconnected to it. The poem is a complex of logical content and feeling, of which only the former is paraphrasable, the form being inextricable from the poetic feeling. We could risk an imperfect formula for Winters’s theorization about the poem: the poem could be seen as an artistic object resulting from a spiritual and linguistic performance by the poet, consisting of words, rhythms, meter etc. Winters reminds us that “the spiritual control in a poem, then, is simply a manifestation of the spiritual control within the poet,” the poem would be a “technique of contemplation, which does not eliminate the need of philosophy or religion, but completes and enriches them” (pp.21-22). The spiritual control within the poet could be, therefore, felt in the poem. Winters exemplifies it with the “limpness” one feels in the versification of T. S. Eliot, correlative of the spiritual limpness informing it; and with the overexcitement of some of Hart Crane’s poems correlated with its underlying intellectual confusion. Winters then arrives at a kind of corollary:

[...] this quality, form, is not something outside the poet, something “aesthetic” and superimposed upon his moral content; it is essentially a part, in fact it may be the decisive part, of the moral content, even though the poet may be arriving at the final perfection of the condition he is communicating while he communicates it and in a large measure as a result of the act and technique of communication (p. 22).

Through the discipline of spiritual control, verbalization and formal perfection, from poem to poem, the poet perfects him or herself. This perfecting is progressive from poet to poet in literary history, as well as from poem to poem in the history and artistic development of a particular poet. The reader (be it a poet, a critic, or a “common”

reader) participates in this spiritual movement, and this is the moral sense of poetry. The quality of the spiritual experience of the poet will reflect, in form and content, in his or her poetry, and this will, on its turn, reflect on the reader, who takes a part of the poet's experience in his or her own moral development. Therefore, the relevance of the poem will be closely linked to the clarity of language and expression as well as the quality and complexity of the experience being elaborated. This is how poetry fulfills its role in human existence. This doctrine quite explains the dictum of Allen Tate according to which "the poet is responsible for his own conscience," since the poem will be a full reflection of his conscience and, therefore, will influence the conscience of those who read it.

DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

The various theories here sketched are based on different ontological grounds corresponding to views of the author endorsing them. Yvor Winters, Allen Tate and T. S. Eliot have a religious point of view, while Richards endorses a materialistic point of view, and in Pound this ontology is not quite clear. However dissimilar their ontological backgrounds, they seem to arrive at somehow similar axiological conclusions.

For these poets and critics, therefore, the morality of poetry lies first and foremost in its linguistic elaboration, since the poet is responsible for the quality of his people's language. However, this assertion could lead us to an "art for art's sake" theory, which does not seem to be the case. Here Richards's theory brings an important point when the critic says that "the arts are our storehouse of recorded values" arising from the artist's experiences and cunningly developed in the artistic work. So, even if the quality of language should be the poet's main preoccupation, the experiences being expressed are also very important, since a wide range of experiences and feelings will somehow "press" new linguistic solutions and, therefore, increase the linguistic field.

But we must also remember the emphasis put by Winters on the formal elements, meter and rhyme, among others; these elements are, according to him, of the utmost importance in the composition of the poem, their role exceeding those of simple arbitrary conventions. Formal rules in poetry are important for a further "sifting" of the language, preventing pure subjectivity and forcing the poet into searching new solutions. Thus, we could say that a poem's significance will be the result of the poet's linguistic ability under the demands of the experience he or she wants to develop sifted through the formal exigencies of poetic convention. Such an endeavor, if well succeeded, provides an art object in which language is intensely concentrated in meaning and form, guaranteeing a unique experience for both poet and reader. Or, as Allen Tate says, the poet's language must have "primary reality," i.e. the nexus between language and reality, and this nexus is somehow dependent on the formal elements.

Pound, on his turn, is still more pragmatic in his appreciation of the role of the poetry in its society. In his views, poetry acquires the status of a science which should, as any science, reach the greatest possible exactitude and objectivity. The responsibility of the poet is no smaller than that of the physician, and he is responsible for the hygiene in language as the physician is responsible for hygiene in language.

Eliot shares with Pound a particular concern with the collective role of poetry and, less pragmatic than Pound, he emphasizes the importance of the poet’s intimacy with the history of his language “in use,” i.e. the language as it was best used during its history, mainly by the poets of the past, through which he will come to produce works meaningful for those of more refined sensibility in his culture, but also capable of saying something to other speakers. Eliot’s theory, then, emphasizes the connection of tradition and the social role of poetry, encompassing the existence and role of poetry throughout the history of its language and nation as well as throughout all of its speakers, with the process of the poet refining his own sensibility to become part of his tradition. We could say that among the theories discussed here, Eliot’s is probably the most organic, since it sees a natural correlation and intertwining of the development of the poet as an individual artist with that of his people, and of his tradition.

As we see, the conclusions the theories reach point to the idea that art’s morality is dependent on its accuracy and honesty concerning the experience being rendered. The experiences of a people are what ground its moral and ethical development, but they cannot be adequately drawn upon if they are not adequately registered, not only in their content but also in their emotional and sensorial tones, and art in its various forms is the only possible way of registering them. Art which is not accurate and honest in registering these experiences, even the most obscene (which are also part of a people’s history and experience), is damaging and, thus, constitutes the only really immoral art.

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