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**Sophocles, Shelley, Emerson,
and the Necessity of Literature**

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**Sophocles, Shelley, Emerson,
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Abstract

In 1821, Percy Bysshe Shelley declared in “A Defence of Poetry” that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (535). His declaration was a response to a call for “intelligent men to stop wasting their time writing poetry and apply themselves to the new sciences, including economics and political theory, that could improve the world” (Reiman 509). Imagine, after over two thousand years of poetry, a writer felt it was necessary to defend creating an art that one could argue defines the nature of western civilization itself. But Shelley’s “Defence” was not merely a rebuttal or a justification of one’s profession or the definition of an art form. Shelley claims that poetry is not only a legitimate activity for a learned person to pursue, but it is also *necessary* for the moral evolution of the citizen and society: “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (517). The scholar, therefore, who teaches poetry—or literature, in general—promulgates observations of human activity, or the human condition, necessary for any worthwhile advancement of civilized peoples, and consequently, teaches a subject essentially *practical*.

Literature as a practical tool for any society is a concept hardly debatable among literary scholars, yet how is the truth of William Carlos Williams’s observation, for example, in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” that “[it] is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there” still valid? Is the audience, that portion of the public reading and studying the literary arts, too limited? Or does the style of literary criticism inherently narrow the number of people interested in learning from a form of expression and insight clearly vital to a violent and suffering world? Is it time to modify our mode of critical expression we literary scholars have held so dear, to stop “preaching to the choir?”

My paper, using literary nonfiction to discuss “man’s fate” addressed in the work of Sophocles and Emerson, will present an alternative way of sharing, of promulgating the “news from poems.” In doing so, I will demonstrate a way to expand our classrooms and promote literature as the necessary and practical art form we already know it to be.

Keywords: Emerson, Sophocles, Shelley, ethics, literature, writing, fate.

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Introduction

In 1821, Percy Bysshe Shelley declared in “A Defence of Poetry” that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (535). His declaration was a response to a call by Thomas Love Peacock, as described by Donald Reiman, for “intelligent men to stop wasting their time writing poetry and apply themselves to the new sciences, including economics and political theory, that could improve the world” (Reiman 509). Imagine, after over two thousand years of poetry, a writer felt it was necessary to defend creating an art that one could argue defines the pinnacle of human nature in western civilization. But Shelley’s “Defence” was not merely a rebuttal or a justification of one’s profession or the definition of an art form. Shelley claims that poetry is not only a legitimate activity for a learned person to pursue, but it is also *necessary* for the moral evolution of the citizen and society: “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (517). The scholar, therefore, who teaches poetry—or literature, in general—promulgates these written observations of human activity, or the human condition, necessary for any worthwhile advancement of civilized peoples, and consequently, teaches a subject essentially *practical*.

Imagination and Reason

We scholars, we promulgators of the value of literature, know this to be true, just as we understand the validity of William Carlos Williams’s point when we read in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” “[it] is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there.” Shelley argues that our ability to understand the wisdom of Williams, for example, comes from our reason and more importantly, our imagination, but he is also quick to point out that poetry, or literature for our purposes [literature: any form of writing that consists of a narrative—the novel, novella, the short story, a poem, a play—and/or has a poetic¹ quality (which allows for certain essays and reportage) and which is generally accepted by academe to have merit], is not or should not be didactic—moral perspectives remain time-sensitive to a certain extent and any attempt to use the literary arts heavily-handedly in this respect diminishes both the work and the essential participant: the reader (517-8). Yet, Shelley makes clear that civilization, in particular the great societies, like Homeric, and later, Sophoclean Greece, need poetry or literature to become great. Homer’s characters embody qualities essential to the foundation of societies, as Shelley describes, “the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object” (516). Though hardly examples of moral perfectionism, these figures, like Achilles, Hector,

¹Poetic: relating to language expressed in a way that demands of its reader, in addition to reason, sensitivity, intuition, and imagination, usually due to its use of symbol.

and Odysseus, live in the art of literature, and as Shelley proposes, “[Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (517). Consequently, the truth of Odysseus’s ethical decisions, for example, and Shelley comments specifically on the “semi-barbarous” nature of revenge, is revealed through the literature, because the latter unveils the “hidden beauty of the world” in its very absence. The imagination, coaxed and trained by the literary arts, will lead to empathy, but the owner of said imagination must work at this, and our job is to make that work more accessible. If this practical tool for advancing civilized society is limited to the few, namely us and fellow literature scholars, or those few citizens dedicated to reading and embracing literature, how can society evolve ethically, if such a thing is possible, as Shelley suggested long ago? Can we spread our literary criticism to a wider audience? If so, how?

Literary Nonfiction

One way, I’m suggesting, is via creative or literary nonfiction. Make the criticism artful. Though I know all of us here know what this genre is, for the sake of my proposal, let me define it here as writer Rebecca McClanahan suggests: “Literary nonfiction aspires to the condition of art [and] uses materials of the ordinary world in extraordinary ways” (McClanahan). Henry D. Thoreau’s *Walden* is literary nonfiction as travelogue, nature writing, and memoir. Our version could include memoir, a rant, a list, but certainly literary references and inspection, a way to investigate the art artfully still offering new insights for the respective texts. Some critics or scholars have already used memoir as a way into their discussion. The late E. R. Dodds, professor of Greek at Oxford, made use of memoir (and humor) in his essay, “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*” in 1968. “On the last occasion,” he writes, “when I had the misfortune to examine in Honour Moderations at Oxford I set a question on the *Oedipus Rex*” [and that question was] ‘In what sense, if in any, does the *Oedipus Rex* attempt to justify the ways of God to man?’” (17). Dodds takes his experience, includes it in his essay, and quite smoothly and creatively explains how these candidates blew their answers to his question and what they *should* have understood from their studies in the Classics. Frankly, the essay is quite funny. Dodds’s criticism here is essentially a conversation, albeit one-sided, but written in a sincere, almost conversational prose from which one feels connected to the author and consequently, the essay and the work of Sophocles. In his autobiography, in fact, Dodds writes of the professor he replaced at Oxford, his teacher, Gilbert Murray, and states that Murray’s lectures “were memorable” not only due to their eloquence and Murray’s apparently striking voice, “but because they were a communication of experience. It was this which gave them their quite extraordinary quality of immediacy” (Rauk). Memoir, therefore, connects the reader to the subject matter from an authenticity, let alone offering a more accessible approach to the literature. We as readers and scholars can empathize with the literary critic

if we know her better, if she is made somewhat vulnerable from open, sincere recollections that she associates with the work she is investigating.

An Example

So, along those lines, I'd like to share a short piece of creative nonfiction on Fate, the *Oedipus Rex*, and Emerson's essay, "Fate." The work is more of an introduction to Sophocles and Emerson, but you will see a possible direction for literary criticism and teaching literature. (Maybe, it's fate?!) Also, besides the appropriateness, in general, of discussing *our* fate, as Sophocles and Emerson do, I think, here at this conference, it's especially appropriate for me to parallel great Greek literature with great American literature.

Fate (Circa High School, 1977)

*"So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather round me,
and hear my confessions.*

Let them groan at my depravities, and blush for my misdeeds."

~Jean-Jacques Rousseau

It's 7:45 in the morning, and you are not going to be late to class. You will even walk the wide, brightly lit main hallway with its well-waxed, burgundy and bone tiles and spend some necessary moments engaged with your friends along hallway lockers. You will laugh from your belly despite the hour. It is who you are. You will go to English first period, Mr. Reed's class. He will be eccentric, and you like that. After you enter Mr. Reed's room, you will settle into your wooden seat attached to your wooden desk, the one you always sit in, second row over, three desks back from the front. Mr. Reed will silently walk his composed glide to the front of the class and manage to contort his small body into a Buddha position in his own wooden seat. He will say, "Ohhmm," and demand gently the same of you and your classmates. You will comply. It's fun. Then, Mr. Reed will stop and tell everyone to open his anthology of world literature to a play by Sophocles, Oedipus the King, first performed in 429 BCE.

Most people when they hear the name Oedipus think of the psychological complex championed by Sigmund Freud who wrote, "It is the fate of all of us perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so" (Knox 131-2). What intrigued Freud about Sophocles's play it seems was the powerful message of fate, that it is quite a natural phenomenon, and that we must all submit to its inescapable and uncompromising power. In the play, Oedipus, our hero, through his own investigation, discovers that he himself is the guilty party, a perpetrator of patricide and incest with his mother. The oracle of Apollo prophesizes the deeds, and Oedipus is defenseless against his own actions. As Bernard Knox suggests, the hero and the enemy are one ("Introduction" 131). And so goes the destiny of man.

At the end of our cul-de-sac lived old Army friends of my parents, General and Mrs. Palmer. I needed ways to make cash over summers and during the school year, so the Palmers hired me to cut their lawn once a week. I was good at it. My dad had taught me the art of mowing lawns with push, gas, and electric mowers, and when I finished beheading the tops of those multitudes of grass blades, nary a single, tiny Kelly green stalk stood tall and free. The trick was to overlap each pass across the lawn, ensuring the new edge of a cut stripe passed well inside the inside wheel of the noisy machine. I was a master. I was thorough and relatively quick. One Saturday, however, while the sun sat high and bright above me, a police officer waved at me from the side of my eye. I quickly cut the engine and walked over to him in the new silence. “Excuse me, son. Can I ask you something?” “Sure!” I said. “How long have you been out here?” “Oh, gosh, about an hour, hour and a half, I guess?” “Okay, well, did you see anyone walk or run by? Say, a man with a dark beard wearing a white t-shirt?” “No, no, I haven’t seen anyone.” “You’re sure?” “Yes, sir!” The policeman turned and walked back down the street. I watched him for a moment. There was a dark sweat stain expanding across his navy blue back.

Ralph Waldo Emerson examines fate as it applies to the natural world and the human in civilization in his essay, “Fate,” published in 1860. He explains, “Nature is no sentimentalist, —does not cosset or pamper us. We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or woman.” Emerson suggests in light of this reality, “The right use of Fate is to bring up our conduct to the loftiness of nature” (780). If we recognize our shared and simultaneous significance and insignificance in the Cosmos, if we can profoundly appreciate that what chemically composes our physiological reality is the same for every other human and living thing, then the anthropomorphic world becomes false and what separates us, that which makes us political or religious or ethnic enemies, disappears.

Hey, dude, did you hear about Freddie? Y’know, that freshman who lives around the corner from you? Well, anyway, check this out. Last Saturday morning he chased his stepmother around their house with a hammer and caught up to her in the garage. Really, man, I’m not kidding! He beat her head in with the thing. Opened it right up! I’m not shittin’ you, man! What? The cops talked to you? No way! Wow! That dude was doin’ in his step-mom two houses down from you cuttin’ the grass! Outrageous, man, outrageous.

Form and “Poetic Justice”

So, by using memoir and creativity, the *form* of the criticism itself becomes more profound, thus adding to the experience of analyzing literature, though here with my “Fate” piece I have obviously only scratched the surface of analysis. The creative and personal qualities of the work stimulate more, one could argue, the right than the left side of the brain, and what Shelley argues with regard to literature, on the imagination and ethics, seems more possible. In addition, the personal and vulnerable attributes of memoir allow for a more

authentic exercise in criticism, and the experience of reading, the action of it, connects the reader to the author, further connecting the reader to the criticism, not to mention possibly enabling an empathetic response to it, as literature enables. (On the latter point, Martha Nussbaum pursues in *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* the idea that literature helps one “imagine what it is like to live the life of another person,” and she refers to Aristotle’s observations on literary art and paraphrases them as, “Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves” (5).) Both Sophocles and Emerson offer their view of the human condition, the way things are or the nature of things, as Lucretius puts it. There’s no moral to the story, there is only the author’s presented image. Yet, with both works, freedom from a seemingly necessary fate exists. Emerson published “Fate” as part of his book, *The Conduct of Life*, and asks with it the fundamental question of ethics, “How shall I live my life?” In addition, according to H. G. Callaway, the entire book, its first chapter on fate, “is a call for creative solutions” (ix). For Sophocles, Oedipus voluntarily blinds himself and quite innocently kills his father. Social pressure based on commonly held attitudes toward parricide, according to Plato, a dreadful crime demanding horrifically long and painful punishment, seems to have compelled the king to this self-mutilation (Dodds 24-5). The audience, aware of the Oedipus story, still knowing its end feels the weight of the tragedy, which as Knox points out, and which any teacher of literature knows, is the story of itself, the audience, the seeming destiny of itself. Literature, again is, of course, our story, the answer to the riddle is man, and the call for creative solutions appears to be an old one.

But, as Emerson explains, even as we affirm the limitations of humankind, we should equally affirm our freedom and the “significance of the individual” (769). With that step and the help of the practical tool that is literature, we transcend the mundane (or Thoreau’s suggested “lives of quiet desperation”) and look at ourselves and our possibilities—this with the imagination enhanced by creative solutions in criticism. So, in the effort to spread the word on the necessity of literature, form matters.

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