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Disciplinary Brief

CONTEMPLATING DIS-ORDER: A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

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My own perspective on this topic arises from my primary work at the intersection of literature and religion. This does not mean I am disinterested in the kind of broader philosophical and theological work Biggar undertakes in this 'brief' – indeed, the opposite is the case, including within my concentration. But I want to introduce a couple of thoughts that arise particularly from some of the literature I study and teach, which for the most part is work published in the 20th and 21st centuries.

My principal question is this: **What is the value of contemplating *dis*-order**, including for those who seek to live in light of what they believe is a divinely ordered world and set of principles and values?

What Is Art For?

A recent article by University of Chicago philosopher Agnes Callard (*The Point*, July 2022 [1]), argues that, as the title announces, "Art is for seeing evil." Callard rejects notions of art and the aesthetic that focus on beauty and seeing the good. Instead, with an eye to narrative fiction in particular, she insists that art achieves something which subverts one of our most basic inclinations: to turn away from the ugly, to censor from our attention all of the harm, cruelty, injustice, catastrophe, degradation, etc., that humans suffer. Art, she argues, causes us to *turn back* to those realities. She writes, "Art suspends our practical projects, releasing the prohibition against attending to the bad. Our ravenous consumption of badness in art reveals just how much we standardly deprive ourselves of it. We commonly praise some piece of art for its 'realism'; we could fault life for its lack thereof."

I reject Callard's reductionism—art also can elevate and enchant. She is wrong, too, to insist that art is not for our moral edification, tied as it is to the very restrictive way she defines art and its supposed purposes. But she is right to point out the value of this other, and I would say equally edifying effect that art exercises: its ability to help us "attend to the bad." Curiously, she compares that central purpose of seeing evil to the seeing eye of God. So gifted are literary authors at forcing us to confront what we would prefer

to turn away from that, she proposes, we transcend the “confines of ordinary humanity” as if illuminated by a “divine spark.”

I find two points of connection with Biggar’s essay worth considering. First, in proposing the possibility of a God’s eye view of evil, though severely limited by our finiteness and corrupted vision, we find a tacit recognition of divine order, that there is goodness which evil has disfigured. Indeed, I would argue that the dissonance we experience when confronting evil inspires a *longing* for goodness in the face of that disruption. A second related point, which is more germane to my consideration of literature in particular, is the unique capacity of art to help us appreciate how deeply *dis*ordered we humans are, and to such an extent that a divine order to existence seems remote, an inaccessible dream for which the world seems to offer little convincing evidence, let alone hope.

The Catholic novelist Flannery O’Connor recognized this tension, though for her the recognition of sin as the premise for salvation and redemption was foremost in her mind. Believing that “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality,” [2] she clarifies some of the difficulty that a Christian or religious writer in particular confronts when seeking to hold forth such a vision:

> *The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make them appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock — to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures.* [3]

For O’Connor, literary artists needed to work hard not only to get people’s attention but to direct their attention in particular ways (though she was careful to distinguish the writer’s task from proselytizing). To move towards a recognition of order which may bear with it a hope of redemption in harmony with that order, the writer must convince her readers of their disorder. Images of that reality is the necessary prelude to capturing an “image of ultimate reality.” Applied in this way, Callard’s argument that ‘art is for seeing evil’ resonates with the prospect of seeing its opposite, as Biggar urges in his essay.

Reading Trauma

Despite the promise of O’Connor’s ambitions for her work, however, there is another kind of literary art that addresses far more extreme experiences of disorder, what literary scholars call ‘literature of trauma.’ I am currently teaching a course on this subject at Yale Divinity School, exploring the literatures that arise out of significant historic traumas: war, the Holocaust, large scale injustice, oppression, and violence inflicted upon generations of people such as African and Native Americans. [4]

These literatures come in many styles and are informed by a range of outlooks, including religious, in the same way that trauma itself has a variety of definitions and features. Some of the poetry and fiction we study resists hope and inclines towards despair; other works press in the opposite direction, attempting to at least gesture towards redemption. But across the multifaceted range of works in this genre one thing is consistent: trauma produces an acute sense of disorder, its victims and survivors left with feelings that defy sense and often emphasize an incapacity to perceive the world as anything but broken and fragmented.

Not surprisingly, the very form of these works often mirrors those traumatic effects, in styles that can be similarly fragmented and disjointed. But what some may dismiss as expressions of 'postmodern' nihilism inflected (or *infected*) by the conviction that there is no truth, no credible metanarrative, no *divine order*, is in fact the effects on art of real evil and its aftermath. I am not saying that a notable amount of literature written in the last several decades does not incline towards such postmodern sensibilities – plenty of it does. Nor am I saying that critical theorists, including literary scholars, do not share and even promote that kind of outlook – plenty of them do. They are no fans of what Nigel Biggar is attempting to affirm.

But I do want to argue that rather than simply denying the legitimacy of his viewpoint, literatures of trauma might problematize Dr. Biggar's assertions in important ways, without necessarily being attached to outlooks that reject them. They are not, to use his word, merely being 'perjorative' when expressing the impulse to reject a sensible orderliness to one's existence. They are expressions of pain. And authors writing out of or on behalf of those who suffer trauma seek to validate that experience and the disorientation that comes with it, and to underscore *its* reality. So, when Dr. Biggar asserts that "there are truths about reality that can be grasped," however limited or distorted are our capacities to do so, trauma literature, like trauma victims, may understandably take exception to that prospect. Another reality – trauma – poses a serious challenge to straightforward affirmations, a situation that Christians especially need to attend by first listening to the painful, disordering realities of those who suffer trauma before insisting upon commitments to a divinely ordered existence.

Living with Disorder

This is particularly the case given the theological cast of what Dr. Biggar means by 'order,' whether applied to moral law, social order, political order, or academic scholarship, in ways that demonstrate what he calls order's "tense consensus." He rightly admits that although, in principle, everyone has access to moral laws that are remarkably consistent across time and cultures, human creatureliness and sinfulness hinders that access. My point about the value of regarding *dis*order resonates with this qualification, though I would like to take it further in light of the literary testimony to trauma as art that helps us 'to see evil.'

I do not deny the influence of the kinds of materialistic or postmodern philosophies that prejudice people to renounce an order to creation, and in the process may harm the prospect of human flourishing. No good

can come to us by opposing our Creator or by questioning the fundamental goodness or purposefulness of his creation. But when people, even whole populations or generations of people, suffer horribly from horrors inflicted upon them, we do them a disservice if we do not attempt to inhabit that space with them, to live with them in that order-defying, and often hope-denying, experience. This can be a messy space, full of ambiguities, anger, and grief that diminish one's capacity to perceive the good, the true, and the beautiful. The art that helps us do this by bearing witness to the traumatic suffering of others, art that itself bears "the impress of extremity on the poetic imagination," as the poet-activist Carolyn Forché (1993) describes it, [5] provides access for us. Such work enables us to contemplate the dis-order that trauma produces, and to respond with compassion – a response I am sure Dr. Biggar would applaud.

Preparing for the Return to Harmony

The poet Geoffrey Hill perhaps best depicted the process of living within disorder as an important prelude to our affirmations of order when he observed, "*Dissonance is the servant preparing the return of harmony*." [6] Hill is looking specifically at poetry that effects this by virtue of its formal qualities. But more broadly, he underscores the principle I am arguing for, that a recognition of the kinds of dissonances that trauma provokes needs to be understood and the persons who suffer them validated before assertions of order or harmony can be heard as paths towards hope and healing. Our charge as witnesses to trauma and on behalf of the traumatized, as the author Charlotte Delbo insists in her trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, is first "to try to look, try to see."

Further Reading

Forché, Carolyn. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Poetry of Witness* (New York: Norton, 1993). Forché demonstrates the widespread body of trauma poetry and the summons to remember those who have suffered.

Mahan, David. “Poetry and the Complexities of Remembrance” (*Milin Havivim*, Sept. 21, 2016); available at https://library.yctorah.org/poetry-and-the-complexities-of-remembrance/. In this paper I argue that love of neighbor involves a commitment to appreciate how complex both trauma and our memory of it can be from two examples of poems about the Holocaust.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).Morrison traces out the difficulties of establishing black literary voices who speak out of profound suffering in a literary establishment that often marginalizes or erases those voices.

Rambo, Shelly. “Spirit and Trauma” (*Interpretation*, 2015, vol. 69). Rambo’s provocative discussion of how Christian theology can respond to trauma by regarding both the integrity of those who suffer and of the theology that makes room for those experiences meaningfully.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).In this classic work on trauma, Scarry explores the difficulties of translating trauma in ways that make the experiences of extreme suffering available to others, and the importance of art as a form of world-making that can help make victims and survivors visible to us.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).One of the best introductions to the range of trauma literatures that show the many artistic challenges and promises of this genre.

End Notes

[1] Callard, Agnes, “Art is for Seeing Evil” (*The Point*, July 15, 2022); https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/art-is-for-seeing evil/?mc_cid=fdd19292aa&mc_eid=8057715bdb.

[2] O’Connor, Flannery, “Novelist and Believer,” *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1970), pp. 154ff; available at: https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=9114.

[3] O’Connor, Flannery, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” Ibid. pp. 25ff.

[4] One thinks here of the WWI poetry of Wilfred Owen, the Holocaust writings of Etty Hillesum and Elie Wiesel (e.g., *Night*), the novels of James Baldwin, Richard Wright (*Native Son*) and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), or the Native American fiction of Leslie Silko (*Ceremony*) and Louise Erdrich (*La Rose*), and the poetry of U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo.

[5] Forché, Carolyn, “Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art” in *Poetry of Witness*, eds. Carolyn Forché and Duncan Wu (New York: Norton, 2014), pp. 17-26.

[6] Hill, Geoffrey, “The True Conduct of Human Judgment,” *Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 69.

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