

Opening Remarks to the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics First Colloquium.

October 4th, 1990

A brief word about the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics: it represents the efforts of colleagues who came together in mutual respect and congeniality to explore freely literature and aesthetics. Part of our inspiration is the British Society of Aesthetics and the European and American Aesthetics societies; and part of our inspiration was a group of outstanding students of literary aesthetics, who formed their own discussion group in what became the Dead Critics Society. We hope always to have student contributions and to honour our academic commitment to continue freely to search and explore the arts.

Leibniz said once—perhaps in an uncharacteristic moment—‘I am glad indeed that Dryden received a thousand pounds sterling for his Virgil; but I wish that Halley could have had four times as much and Newton, ten.’ Today in Australia Dryden would not get a thousand pounds for Virgil and one reason is that philosophic speculation about the arts is not alive and well here, and the corridors of power can presume to conclude about the arts in a reductive way.

Yet the arts are a perpetual mystery. There are many mysteries about mankind, but not the least of these is: why art? Why the arts? Why the need to paint bison in the caves of Lascaux? Or to paint a sunset? Why the need to make the Parthenon or an amphora not just useful? Why the need to tell of love or sorrow in rhyme or rhythm? Or to tell a tale about the lilies of the field? Why make music or song? Why are the sounds of the earth and sky not enough?

Is art, then, only imitation of reality? Or celebration of reality? Is art, as Plotinus thought, a metaphysical homecoming? Or heart-ravishing knowledge, as Sir Philip Sidney declared? Is art conquered chaos, improver of the real? Is it the saving illusion of orphan man? The recuperation of psychic unity? Unalienated joyful labour? Or play? A semantic free fall?

These questions and countless more, rising from the phenomenon of art-making, are older than Plato and as new and fresh and exciting as Derrida.

But these questions are complex and not to be simplified or traduced.

Who knows what lies at the end of the free enquiry of the academy?

Perhaps one day some politician will have the same dream Descartes once had. He tells of a dream in which he was offered the choice of a dictionary, which symbolized to him a compendium of the sciences, or a collection of the works of the poets. Descartes chose the poets.

So—the existence of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics is really a metaphor for free enquiry into that complex and unique phenomenon, art-making mankind.

And there is much enquiry to do, for as Marshall McLuhan once said: 'A man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a metaphor?'

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President

Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics