The Stricture of the Dialectic

Sister Mary Francis Slattery


Michael Edwards's recent book of reflections Towards a Christian Poetics departs from the main current of literary studies. Noticing in Pascal's Pensées a dual perspective, of man's grandeur and his misère after the Fall recounted in Genesis, he extends it to include the reversal of misère to a condition superior to man's original grandeur, in the biblical "new heavens and new earth." Borrowing Hegel's term dialectic for the "ternary process" of creation, fall, and re-creation alluded to in the Bible, he observes that Pascal's dialectic drew "a precise pattern for understanding the pattern of everything."

Dr. Edwards has read widely and is an accomplished translator. Himself a Christian, he is aware that readers may not be, but Western civilization has been, and "the Bible itself has figured for centuries as the supreme Book." He takes it on its own terms.

Dialectic for Plato had had only a logical function. Early neoplatonists gave it logical and ontological functions, and Hegel's dialectic was ontological. By applying it to extra-mental realities, Edwards uses the word as Hegel did. He explicitly espouses the neoplatonic theory of literature as opposed to the "loosely Aristotelian" "mimetic" theory: "What we are discussing is... a theory of the relation of literature to reality."

Both the dialectical perspective of the Bible and Neoplatonism are adhered to throughout. Both attract his notice to transcendence beyond the literary work instead of to the work itself. Considered separately, the dialectical perspective restricts his interpretation, blocking out significant aspects of literary works; and the neoplatonic assumption blurs the distinction between the mental and the extra-mental.

Meanwhile, he writes flexibly and engagingly, with flashes of brilliant momentary insight before the dialectic is back like a boomerang, and his glance goes beyond the object he is considering to the transcendent. Literary quotations and keenly experienced visual art lead into "terms of the dialectic of our desire, for this world and for another." He assumes that literature "will derive from" religious interpretation "which is also its end." Literature, he says, is a "process," it exists "because of our desire for reality." "My contention," he notes, "is that part of the function of language and literature is to strain towards" the "spiritualizing of the body" referred to by Saint Paul.

The dialectic is applied not only to language and literature but frequently to light, to music, to translation, and even to silence. He perceives comedy as enacting "the misère of language" and as "a means to its transformation." Language itself is
"fallen." It "comes from a past that is evil," but writing "operates recreatively."

Comedy farcically enacts "realities of the human condition." Edwards claims it "can be deadly serious, showing and fictively purging the fall." Observing "story" (non-dramatic narrative literature), he claims that the memory of the plague in the Decameron "qualifies its paradise," showing not "an achieved salvation from misère but a glimpse, a metaphor of that salvation." Dante's Commedia, "comprehensively dialectical," is comedy in that it "achieves the spiritual marriage of Dante with Beatrice; but it is tragedy" because it "effects, by its last movement, a vast renewal" of Dante, "of the whole world, and of the relation of all things to God."

In his treatment of tragedy, Edwards adds determinism to the dialectic. The tragic hero's "will" is "far from free." Oedipus' "ability to solve the Sphinx's riddle... led, through his marrying of Jocasta, to his downfall." What the marriage (innocently contracted) led to was the plague.

Moses Hadas explains the Greeks' premise: "the world of gods and the world of men were quite apart... Each followed his own nature; for the gods two plus two might equal five" whereas "a man must continue making it four," thus "tripped up by a system he cannot control or even understand." However, the gods did not regulate; they were "simply indifferent."

After Oedipus' discovery that he had killed his father, he summoned Tiresias, forced him to speak, then angrily rejected his revelation. Despite warnings from Creon, Tiresias, and the Chorus, he sent for the shepherd, who confirmed it. Oedipus' arrogance flared up, then suspicion. Hubris drove him to self-ruin. The cohesiveness of Sophocles' invention was responsible for the seeming inevitability.

Edwards's interest in translation is seen in his devoting two informative chapters to it. He concludes that a translator "changes" language; such change "draws its ultimate significance from the dialectic of Creation, Fall and Recreation," opposing Babel.

Cardinal aspects of great literary works that he mentions are passed over, deferring to the dialectic. Moreover, when theoretical explanation is expected, the reader is entertained instead by narration and description of hilarious scenes from Molière, conversations of Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop and her garbling of Hamlet, and speeches of Dickens's Mrs. Gamp.

The total result of the stricture of the dialectic is an impression of impoverishment, an impression confirmed when in chapter nine, theme eleven partially repeats theme one, and theme twelve cites a familiar hierarchy of the five senses. Often, too, having taken a stand, Edwards later leans toward its opposite. Shifting of purpose shows in the opening paragraphs of the first and last chapters, and occurs unexpectedly in the passing from chapter four to five and from seven to eight, and again in the sudden extension of scope in thesis twenty-four of chapter nine.

As a neoplatonist Edwards overlooks the fact that relationship is not identity: "every sight is a sign, and a man is even the image of God. (Painting is no trifling matter.)" Painting is a visual art and God is invisible. True, Christ was visible in the Incarnation, but no human being looks like Him physically. God being a spirit, the expression "made in the image and likeness of God" could not mean that visually as in a painting, man looks like God. Edwards realizes that, of course, but although painting is indeed "no trifling matter," what is the significance of the parenthetical statement's position in the paragraph?

His dialectic and neoplatonism in combination, or separately, do not elucidate the arts. For centuries the arts have enchanted Christians, Jews, Moslems, and atheists susceptible to their values, without reference to eternity. Art's reference is usually unique, human, and rarely direct. Even poets whose Christian reference was direct did not owe their artistic excellence to that fact.

Christianity and art differ in source, material, form, and purpose. Edwards's study leans toward Christianity, the larger and more lasting of the two. Moreover, a
meditative person can view anything in the perspective of God's existence and nature, thus contemplating, responding religiously. However, stressing art's particular connections with religious "patterns" is reducing it. The poet "makes" a new "object," having its own "beginning, middle and end." It is not religion. He could be an atheist. As such a Christian is not a better poet than a non-Christian. Edwards might agree, I surmise. His responses are sensitive until the dialectical perspective makes of them symbols, enlarging objects unduly and occasionally shrinking transcendent reality. Simply "to see the object as in itself it really is," as Matthew Arnold advised, is implicit praise of the artist, and can as such be implicit praise of God, without contradiction or undue demands on art.

Although Edwards uses Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic terms and mentions him as one in a series of "writers," he does not seem to value his insights. The same is true regarding Aristotle. He quotes I. A. Richards's claim that in Aristotle's account "pity and fear are opposites," whereas Aristotle had said "pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by the misfortune of one like ourselves." He quotes with approval Racine's "most famous theoretical statement," the last eight lines of which are from 1448a2, a17, a27 and 1453a9-12 of Aristotle's Poetics.

Had Edwards closely scrutinized the statements of precisely these two monumental theorists, he would have come away with gains. De Saussure established the conditions for clear understanding of language, which should obviate for good the tendency to mistake linguistic reference for reality. Aristotle had done the same in regard to the tragedy of the Greeks.

Despite these regrettably negative observations, I perceive Edwards as talented, learned, and original, but misdirected by inappropriate sources of literary theory.