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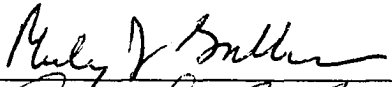
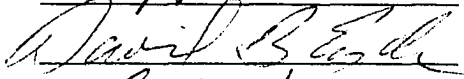
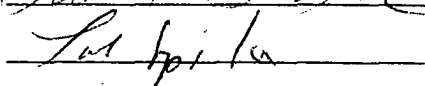
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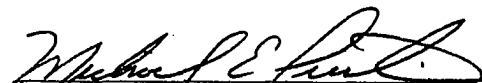
ORDER, CHAOS, AND IRONY
An Essay

GOD'S MAN
A Short Story

A MAN OF HIS WORD
A Short Story

APPROVED:


(Dean of the Graduate School)

ORDER, CHAOS, AND IRONY

GOD'S MAN

and

A MAN OF HIS WORD

by

Pinkney J. Garrison III, BA

An essay and two short stories
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in partial fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
June, 1983

PREFACE

When I began to work towards the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, I aimed at equipping myself to write commercial fiction of literary quality, while pursuing philosophy as an avocation. Therefore, it seems only fair that I should present evidence of my proficiency in both areas when I apply for this degree. The essay and the two short stories that follow are representative of my present abilities and should provide some basis for judgment as to how far I have progressed.

The essay, titled "Order, Chaos, and Irony," attempts to identify the root cause of the jihad, or holy war, and the change in our basic thinking needed to eliminate this plague. Although the issues addressed are quite specific, the problem requires consideration of basic questions about the nature of the universe and our ability to comprehend it. The essay serves a dual purpose; it is at once representative of my ability to handle philosophical problems and a statement of my basic philosophical position--a position that, if my belief that philosophy can provide a grounding for good writing is correct, ought to be reflected in my fiction.

The short stories are included to test this premise, as well as to represent my current capabilities as a writer of fiction. In the rationale supporting my plan of study, I claimed that a serious writer had a duty to entertain, but ought not to serve up cotton candy for his audience. This requires a story to present believable people in plausible and interesting situations, wherein they react to what happens in accordance with their world views and knowledge. Silas Heywood, God's man in Pike County, meets these criteria in my estimation--and provides the reader with an opportunity to learn something about simple preachers and the way they view the world, without being dull in the process.

Jeremiah Covey, the hero of "A Man of His Word," is just as real to me as Silas Heywood, and his situation is just as plausible. Nevertheless, I am less satisfied with this story. It is not as interesting as "God's Man," and therefore not as entertaining. This is, I now think, a result of too much effort on my part to make the reader understand what drives Jeremiah to murder. My motivation in writing the story is too transparent.

I have chosen to include "A Man of His Word," despite my dissatisfaction, because it presents a contrast with "God's Man," illustrating one way in which my philosophical position can inform my fiction. Both Silas Heywood and Jeremiah Covey begin with convictions about the world that are, if not wrong, at least not wholly correct. Both encounter a situation which reveals the inadequacies of their model. Silas Heywood is able to learn--to

alter his model; Jeremiah Covey is not able to do this. The results of this incapacity speak for themselves and illustrate a conclusion implicit in the philosophical position set forth in the essay--we humans must, by virtue of our nature and the nature of the universe, commit ourselves to notions which may be incorrect; but they will fare best who are able to see the results of using these notions or models and make appropriate adjustments. Those who can foresee bad results, and alter the model accordingly, before they step through the hole in the walkway or pull the trigger of a shotgun, will fare best of all, of course--provided their foresight is accurate. In my future, longer, fiction, I hope to use characters with less simple minded world views, placed in more complicated situations, to explore this idea.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For whatever ability to choose well is demonstrated here, and for whatever of value is found in my ability to express myself, I owe thanks to more people than I can list--or even recall. A few however, demand special note:

My parents, who taught me that it was permissible, even mandatory, to ask, why?

Levada, who sees "things as they are" and asks "why?" but understands that I "dream things that never were, and ask 'why not?'" and sets me free to try.

William Springer, Peter Robinson, and especially David Hall, who, for six years, have assailed the foundations of my world view, encouraged me to defend those foundations, criticized my blundering efforts to learn how, and in the process taught me a way of thinking.

Malcom McConnell, who encouraged me to believe I had talent and taught me more than I believed there was to know about how to fit words together.

June 8, 1983

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ORDER, CHAOS, AND IRONY

An Essay

Deep in the human unconscious is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic.

--from "The Sayings of Muad'Dib" by the Princess Irulan¹

¹ Frank Herbert, Dune (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1977), p. 373.

Because we are human, we need to know; because we are human, we cannot know. The fictional Princess Irulan has captured the essential irony of the human condition. In the novel Dune, in which she appears, Herbert's central thesis is that this ironic situation is the root cause of authoritarianism and the bloodiest form of human conflict, the jihad, or holy war. His hero, Maud'Dib, tries to abort the process leading to the jihad--and fails. Herbert, if we are to judge by this work, has concluded that the Princess Irulan has described our situation correctly, and that the jihad cannot be avoided. He is at least half right: our situation is ironic. But Herbert, and therefore his hero, Maud'Dib, fail to recognize that the jihad is a product of our ironic situation and our reaction to it, not an escape or solution. If we can identify the precise nature of our situation and the mechanism by which it generates the jihad, holy wars will become unnecessary.

Herbert depicts the philosopher as the most dangerous of men: not because he makes war himself, but because he justifies the jihad by supplying the illusion of certainty. It may be a measure of the failure of philosophy that Herbert's thesis is not unsupportable. There are certainly other causes for human conflict, but it is arguably the case that the most bitter conflicts and the most terrible destructions arise from the encounters of human groups embracing differing philosophies or theologies, each convinced that it knows; that its culture is

based on "truth." It is frequently the philosopher who supplies the intellectual backing for that conviction.

Embedded in Herbert's view is the notion that cultures follow, or take their values from, philosophy. Recent history makes such a view tempting. Mein Kampf had at least pretensions to be philosophy and was surely supported in some ways by the philosophic notions of Hegel and Heidegger. We ourselves are involved in a conflict between those who believe Marx captured "the truth" and those who cannot admit that his ideas have any validity. There are, however, good reasons to doubt that culture is completely shaped by philosophy. It may well be the case, as David Hall claims, that all ideas originate in culture; that philosophy is in fact a critique of culture--and therefore limited by culture.² If this is true, the philosopher is at least relieved of primary culpability for holy wars. The drive towards truth must lie in the culture, and the philosopher can, at worst, be charged only with providing excuses for believing that one's culture possesses some "truth" which ought to be universally accepted. It would seem worthwhile, then, to examine the relationship between philosophy and culture with a view towards discovering what it is about philosophy, culture, or the relationship between them that creates the jihad. How is it that we find ourselves holding opposing views, and so convinced of our

² David L. Hall, Eros and Irony (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 3-112.

rightness that we feel justified in imposing our "truth" on others?

What, exactly, are we talking about when we use these terms? Marshall Sahlins understands culture to be a "meaningful scheme" for living.³ We might usefully add that it is essential to the notion of culture that this "meaningful scheme" be shared by some identifiable group of people who govern their lives according to it, and note that the scheme can include both an idea of "how things are" and at least some set ways of dealing with things --the habitual ways of acting we call ritual.

The dictionary defines philosophy as:

1. a love of wisdom or knowledge.
2. a study of the processes governing thought and conduct; theory or investigation of the principles or laws that regulate the universe and underlie all knowledge and reality. . . .
3. the general principles and laws of a field of study, activity, etc. . . .
4. a particular system of principles for the conduct of life. . . .⁴

³ Marshall Sahlins, Culture and Practical Reason (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. viii.

⁴ Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd ed.

It is at once apparent that philosophy, as the dictionary defines it, is concerned with the very stuff of culture. Perhaps Hall is correct and culture is prior to philosophy, setting, so to speak, the agenda for philosophy by providing the material on which philosophy operates as well as its ground rules for examination. More general knowledge supports this view, teaching that culture is at least temporally prior to philosophy. Even the most primitive of human groups must be held to have a "culture" (if we accept Sahlins' definition) and it is surely the case that there was a culture among the ancient Greeks, a culture strong enough to produce Homer and Hesiod, long before Thales began to practice what we have come to know as philosophy. Further, examination of the work of the Greek philosophers indicates that they did take their ideas from their culture. Frederick Copleston argues that the pre-Socratics systematically extended to the whole universe a principal constituent of Greek culture; the concept of law or governing principles.⁵ There are, then, strong arguments in favor of Hall's thesis, but the relationship between culture and philosophy is more complex than he admits.

If it is true that philosophy takes its ideas from culture, and is therefore limited by culture, it is also true that cultures succeed one another and exist side by side with other cultures. Successive cultures have access to the

⁵ A History of Philosophy, Vol I, Greece and Rome, Image Books ed., 1962 (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1946), p. 30.

philosophy--the distilled and examined set of values and viewpoints--of the cultures that preceded them and those that coexist with them; it is at least possible for a culture to incorporate elements of these alien philosophies into its set of rules. It seems fair to conclude that the real relationship between culture and philosophy is symbiotic; philosophy is in fact a distillation and critique of the culture in which it resides, but culture (at least since Thales) is itself, at least partially, a product of the history of philosophy it inherits. Copleston claims that "[within the history of philosophy] there is continuity and connection, action and reaction, thesis and antithesis, and no philosophy can be understood fully unless it is seen in its historical setting and in the light of its connection with other systems" (p. 19). If the relationship between philosophy and culture is interactive, philosophy can be understood as both a foundation of culture and a distillation of its principle elements or claims. If this is true, it ought to be possible to locate the root causes of the jihad by examining the history of philosophy.

The problem, of course, is where to begin. If Western Philosophy is thought of as a tapestry, it is clear that we cannot hope to make a detailed examination of every thread; it may be sufficient, however, to locate the main strands and grasp the total picture. To do this, one must have a perspective from which to approach the work. Plato and Aristotle offer such perspectives, but present different pictures of the tapestry. I

have chosen to take Aristotle as a point of departure, partly because he is my "hero"--the philosopher to whom I turn for the foundations of my understanding; partly because I believe he is the "hero" of Western Philosophy, or at least one of the "heroes"; and partly because Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, believed it was possible to "know" everyday things. This ability to "know" seems fundamental to the notion of truth that fuels the jihad.

* * *

"All men by nature desire to know."⁶ So Aristotle wrote. Our common sense tells us that he was right; men do desire to know.⁷ But if this seems immediately clear, a moment of reflection will begin to raise questions: What is it that men desire to know? What do we mean by knowing? Is it possible to know?

Aristotle consistently maintains that we "think" or "suppose" we know a thing when we believe we know the cause of that thing.⁸ It seems clear, then, that he believed that what we desire to know are things, and that what we mean by knowing is to

⁶ Metaphysica, I, 1.; all references to Aristotle's works are to Richard McKeon's Introduction to Aristotle, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).

⁷ And women, too. Aristotle did not mean it so, but I take the words "man" and "men" to mean "human beings" whenever they appear in this essay.

⁸ See, for example, Analytica Posteriora, I, 2. & II, 11., Physica, II, 3., Metaphysica, I, 1.

know the cause of a thing. It also seems clear that he did believe it was possible to know, at least in some sense. It is, however, important to remember that he carefully qualified this claim.

It is our nature to desire to know, he says; not to attain this desire. "We suppose ourselves to possess unqualified scientific knowledge of a thing . . ." he says (Analytica Posteriora, I, 2. [emphasis added]), and again, "we think we know. . ." (Analytica Posteriora, II, 11. [emphasis added]). What seemed initially to be simply the clear statement of an intuitive truth is already beginning to dissolve into a riddle. Do we really know, or just think we do? Just what is it that we know, or think we know? The riddle becomes an enigma when we begin to consider a further implication of Aristotle's dictum. If it is the case that all men desire to know, and that they have at least some capacity to know, then it must also be the case that we ought to pay attention to what human beings say.⁹ Aristotle, at least, does so. He commonly begins an inquiry with an examination of "what has been said," and he does not lightly discard what he discovers. This practice further complicates our problem, since it leads to a multiplicity of meanings for two key words; "thing" and "cause."

⁹ Aristotle would qualify this claim, arguing that we need only pay attention to what is said by those who use their reason, or to what has stood the test of time and general acceptance.

As Richard McKeon notes,¹⁰ Aristotle recognized four kinds of things: perceived, experienced, made, and known. Within these categories there is room for an enormous variation in concreteness versus abstraction, in the extent to which a thing can be construed to be material or immaterial, and in the necessity or contingency of a thing. If there are variations in the kinds of things, and if cause is the means of knowing a thing, we can expect there to be more than one kind of cause. There are, according to Aristotle, four kinds of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final,¹¹

The four causes are not Aristotle's inventions. As we might suspect, he has discovered them in what has been said. Examining the work of his predecessors, he finds that each of them has discovered one of these causes and has attempted to use it as a general explanation. There is good reason to believe that we have done no better since, at least in the West. David Hall has suggested that there are four major schools of Western Philosophy-- materialism, formalism, naturalism, and volitionalism--and that each is derived from concentration on one

¹⁰ Introduction to Aristotle, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. xxv.

¹¹ These appear in various forms throughout Aristotle's work. See, for example, Analytica Posteriora, II, 11., Physica, II, 3., Metaphysica, I, 2.

of Aristotle's causes.¹² With the caveat that at least some philosophers appear to have used pairs of causes, this seems to be virtually unarguable. The difficulty, and it is perhaps a basic problem in Western Philosophy, is that the four causes appear to be inherently contradictory in some respects, and that each becomes unsatisfactory as an explanatory mechanism at some point.

Consider, for example, the effect each has upon the concept of freedom. Each cause, and its corresponding school, generates a different notion of what man's primary concern is or ought to be, and with it a correspondingly different notion of what freedom might mean. But freedom is commonly defined as an escape or release from some restriction; for each "freedom to," there is a corresponding "freedom from," and if any cause is pushed to its limit as an explanatory mechanism, held to explain everything, the thing we are to be free from ceases to exist as a possible limitation and freedom, according to the common definition, ceases to be a meaningful term. For example: if materialism is pushed to the limit, then we have no capacity for responsibility. If this is the case, how can freedom to be irresponsible have any meaning? It is no longer a freedom to be, but simply what is. By the same token, if volitionalism is pushed to the limit, there can be no limitations placed on what

¹² In lectures at the University of Texas at El Paso during the summer and fall of 1982. See also Eros and Irony, pp. 117-20.