

# interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

May 1985

Volume 13 Number 2

- 143 Ronna Burger Socratic *Eirōneia*
- 151 Peter Emberley Rousseau and the Management of the Passions
- 177 Robert Webking Virtue and Individual Rights in John Adams' *Defence*
- 195 Donald J. Maletz The Meaning of 'Will' in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*
- 213 Vukan Kuic Foreword for  
"The Politics of Alain" by Yves R. Simon
- 215 Yves R. Simon "The Politics of Alain"  
translated by John M. Dunaway
- 233 Walter Nicgorski Leo Strauss and Liberal Education

## Book Reviews

- 251 Maureen Feder-Marcus *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks*  
by Ofelia Schutte
- 261 Richard Velkley *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies  
on Plato* by Hans-Georg Gadamer, translated and  
with an Introduction by P. Christopher Smith
- 268 Will Morrisey *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science,  
Hermeneutics, and Praxis* by Richard J. Bernstein;  
*G. W. F. Hegel: an Introduction to the Science of  
Wisdom* by Stanley Rosen
- 277 Larry Arnhart *The Artist as Thinker: from Shakespeare to Joyce*  
by George Anastaplo

## Short Notices

- 285 J. E. Parsons, Jr. *Eighty Years of Locke Scholarship: a Bibliographical  
Guide* by Roland Hall & Roger Woolhouse; *John  
Locke's Moral Philosophy* by John Colman
- 287 Will Morrisey *Rhetoric and American Statesmanship* edited by Glen  
Thurrow & Jeffrey D. Wallin; *Power, State, and  
Freedom: an Interpretation of Spinoza's Political  
Philosophy* by Douglas J. Den Uyl; *John Stuart Mill  
and the Pursuit of Virtue* by Bernard Semmel; *Essays  
in Political Philosophy* by J. E. Parsons, Jr.

# interpretation

Volume 13 number 2

Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin

Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz • Howard B. White (d. 1974)

Consulting Editors John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Erich Hula • Arnaldo Momigliano • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson

Associate Editors Fred Baumann • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Derek Cross • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Will Morrisey • Charles Rubin • Leslie Rubin • John A. Wettergreen • Bradford Wilson • Catherine Zuckert • Michael Zuckert

Assistant Editors Marianne C. Grey • Laurette G. Hupman

Design & Production Martyn Hitchcock

Annual subscription rates individual \$13; institutional \$16; student (3-year limit) \$7. *INTERPRETATION* appears three times a year.

Address for correspondence *INTERPRETATION*, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

Authors submitting manuscripts for publication in *INTERPRETATION* are requested to follow the *MLA Style Sheet* and to send clear and readable copies of their work.

Copyright 1985 • Interpretation

## How to Think about Art

**The Artist as Thinker: From Shakespeare to Joyce.** By George Anastaplo. (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1983. 499 pp.: cloth \$32.95, paper \$14.95.)

LARRY ARNHART

*Northern Illinois University*

In his first two books—*The Constitutionalist: Notes on the First Amendment* (1971) and *Human Being and Citizen: Essays on Virtue, Freedom and the Common Good* (1975)—George Anastaplo argues that nature provides standards for law and politics and that through reason we can discover these standards, though prudence is necessary in order to apply universal principles to particular circumstances. In the extensive notes of these books, Anastaplo tantalizes readers with suggestions as to how his argument could be extended to works of literature. Those readers will welcome *The Artist as Thinker* as an elaboration on this literary criticism.

As in his previous books, Anastaplo weaves a colorful variety of topics into intricate patterns of thought. Thus, he shows us how the philosophic study of art can itself become a work of art. He devotes thirteen chapters to thirteen English-language authors: William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Bunyan, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Matthew Arnold, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, William S. Gilbert (as collaborator with Arthur Sullivan), Robert Louis Stevenson, and James Joyce. In his epilogue, appendices, and notes, he comments on artists and artistic thinkers such as Homer, Callimachus, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Edwin Muir, Leo Strauss, George Seferis, Pablo Picasso, Woody Allen, and Harry Jaffa. Anastaplo also describes his work in helping to design and construct the stained-glass windows in Rockefeller Memorial Chapel at the University of Chicago.

Some readers may consider it self-indulgent to include such a wide range of topics in one book. But careful readers will be captivated by the rich and leisurely thoughtfulness of the book. To support that claim, I will summarize Anastaplo's general argument and then reflect on some of the possible objections to his reasoning. Regrettably, I cannot even touch upon the many points of interpretation that fill his work, which perhaps constitute the most valuable part of the book.

The literary artist shows us human beings making moral choices. Anastaplo argues that to fully understand what the artist is doing we must judge whether his characters make the *right* choices. And we should expect that those who make mistakes will be punished by the bad consequences of their mistakes.

Anastaplo goes on to say that although there are many reasons for moral error, the ultimate reason in most cases is that people are not as careful in *thinking*

about their choices as they should be. From this point of view, knowledge *is* virtue. To be happy one must *know* what a human being must do to be truly happy. Therefore, one must be *prudent*. That is, one must cultivate the capacity for practical judgment to achieve a good human life. Those who are imprudent—those who act without understanding the probable consequences of their actions or the goal of human life—are likely to suffer. Moreover, to portray the importance of prudence for human life, the artist himself must be a prudent man. For this reason, Anastaplo argues, great artists are also great thinkers.

Anastaplo's paramount example of the union of art and thought is Shakespeare. The moral universe of Shakespeare's tragedies is a rational world governed by a sense of what prudence demands of human beings. Those characters who act imprudently—those inclined to misjudgments—receive the punishment appropriate to their mistakes. And in most cases, serious misjudgments lead to death. When a character in Shakespeare's tragedies suffers a premature death, Anastaplo suggests that we examine that character's actions to understand how he went wrong. Shakespeare's artistic representations of human action convey moral lessons on the nature of the good life.

Consider *Hamlet* as an example. Most literary critics have tried to explain Prince Hamlet's indecisiveness in executing the commands of the Ghost while taking for granted that it was his duty to revenge his father's death by killing King Claudius. (I know of one exception to this point of view—Harold C. Goddard's essay, "Hamlet," in *The Meaning of Shakespeare*.) But Anastaplo challenges this assumption. He questions whether Hamlet was wise in serving his father's desire for revenge, or whether his hesitation manifested a healthy instinct. Once we ask such questions, Anastaplo suggests, we are likely to conclude that Hamlet deserved to die because he was imprudent in trying to kill the King. As long as King Claudius posed no immediate threat to Hamlet or to the welfare of Denmark, it would have been prudent for Hamlet to have waited until the time when he would have legally succeeded Claudius as king. The consequences of killing a king are so disastrous that it is usually reasonable to consider alternative courses of action.

One does not have to agree completely with this sort of interpretation to recognize its sensibleness. In fact, the most impressive feature of Anastaplo's book is the commonsense practicality of his reasoning. At a time when most academic literary critics devote themselves to theoretical constructions—or should I say "deconstructions"?—comprehensible only to other academic literary critics, it is satisfying to read a book that shows how literary art can help one think about the moral issues of life.

In many cases, the merit of Anastaplo's literary observations depends less on their novelty than on their clarity. Anastaplo notices, for example, that in moving from Shakespeare to Joyce, there is a shift from political matters to private matters, from community to individuality. Therefore, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* can be regarded as the conclusion "of the more or less steady re-

treat from the grand public world of Shakespeare into the intense, intimate, the all too often disturbed private world of the modern artist—that private world in which neither old-fashioned nobility nor genuine philosophy nor the deepest piety can be taken seriously” (p. 233). A contemporary literary critic like Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*) would describe this as a move from the “high mimetic” mode of fiction to the “low mimetic” mode and finally to the “ironic” mode. But in his freedom from pedantic terminology of this sort, Anastaplo’s writing is rare in its precision, rigor, and manly toughness.

Rather than developing a formal theory of literary criticism, Anastaplo tries to consider each literary work on its own terms. And yet his interpretations do depend upon certain general principles. He points to Leo Strauss as the source of those principles. But since Strauss pointed back to Plato and Aristotle, it is not surprising that many of Anastaplo’s arguments resemble those set forth by Aristotle in the *Poetics*.

I believe it would be instructive to consider the various ways in which *The Artist as Thinker* parallels the *Poetics*. For instance, Aristotle maintains that a tragic plot is most apt to arouse fear and pity if it contains a discovery leading to a reversal of fortune that is unexpected but inevitable: the tragic hero is surprised to discover a causal chain of events of which his suffering is the ineluctable result. The best sort of reversal is one in which a superior man of great reputation and good fortune falls to bad fortune not through egregious vice or depravity but through some “error” (*ἀμαρτία*). And in the best tragedies—like Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*—the hero falls because he is in “error” about his identity or the identities of those closest to him. Tragedy stirs the greatest pity and fear by portraying a person who, because of his ignorance of himself, unexpectedly but inevitably brings upon himself and those he loves the greatest suffering. The most fearful punishments, Aristotle seems to say, are those that a man inflicts upon himself because of his self-ignorance. Anastaplo seems to offer us a variation of this Aristotelian view of tragedy, according to which the tragic hero’s “error” is *imprudence*.

In any case, Anastaplo surely agrees with Aristotle that art should be a thoughtful imitation of nature, so that the pleasing stories of the artist will instruct us in how to live according to nature’s dictates. But as many critics of Aristotle’s *Poetics* have noted, this view of art puts poetry in the service of philosophy: the job of the artist is to convey philosophic lessons in poetic form to charm that multitude of people who lack the capacity for philosophic thought. Consequently, an Aristotelian critic like Anastaplo stresses the intellectual content of art while neglecting the instinctive, emotional power of the artistic performance.

One can say in Anastaplo’s defense, however, that not only does he understand this criticism, he even concedes that it contains an element of truth. (See, for example, pp. 16, 32, 138, 164–65, 200–1, 224, 247, 316, 362–63, 381, 411.) (Could not the same be said about both Plato and Aristotle?) But on some

points, his concessions seem almost to contradict his general argument. For instance, while maintaining that artists help us to understand nature by their presentation of universals as they manifest themselves in particulars, Anastaplo suggests that the artistic emphasis on particulars may distort the reality of the universals: "Are they not radically dependent upon the particulars? Is not all this still another way of saying that the artist, as artist, may not truly know what he is doing—that he cannot be fully a thinker?" (p. 412). "Poets have long been suspected of saying things which they do not understand" (p. 349). Does this mean that considering the "artist as thinker" diverges necessarily from considering the "artist as artist"? If so, then I am not sure how this can be reconciled with Anastaplo's insistence that artists are "obviously thoughtful beings—and the better the artist, generally, the more thoughtful" (p. 167). (I have confronted a similar difficulty in *Aristotle on Political Reasoning: A Commentary on the "Rhetoric,"* pp. 13–16, 24–35, 55–56, 163–65, 172–76, 190.)

This problem has ramifications for Anastaplo's argument. For if great art depends upon a thoughtful grasp of the enduring standards of nature, then the movement in modern art towards an intense concentration on the personal experiences of the artist would indicate—as Anastaplo claims—a decline from the artistic excellence of an Aeschylus or a Shakespeare. But if the "artist as artist" appeals to the irrational side of human life by probing human emotions and appetites, then the contemporary celebration of artistic "self-expression" and "creativity" could be seen as the perfection of the true purpose of art.

There is an even deeper point at issue here. When Anastaplo warns that the artist's concern for particulars may obstruct his access to universals, he implies that to fully understand the nature of things, one must consider "the significance of the 'ideas' in the Platonic dialogues and of the 'self-evident' in Aristotle's discussions of reasoning" (p. 412). Anastaplo's understanding of, and his confident reliance upon, man's rational grasp of nature as a guide to human life presupposes the classical rationalism of Plato and Aristotle. That is to say, Anastaplo presupposes that the universe is intelligible and that the human mind can discover that intelligibility. This means that there are certain ultimate principles of rationality governing the universe and the mind. Plato called them "ideas," while Aristotle spoke about the self-evident first principles—the axioms—of all thought.

Obviously this leads us into the most difficult and fundamental questions that human beings can ask. It is understandable, therefore, that Anastaplo refrains from pursuing such questions very far lest he push his readers beyond the horizon of this particular book. For his purposes, reliance upon commonsense judgments is sufficient. And yet Anastaplo does give his most curious readers suggestions as to how they might begin to think about this ultimate question concerning the intelligibility of the universe.

One way that art makes things intelligible is by minimizing the role of chance. The poet, unlike the historian, does not record particular events as they occur in

life, because the poet's fictional world must have a logical unity and wholeness that is rarely, if ever, found in life. Shakespeare can control the action in his tragedies so that premature death comes only to those who deserve it, but everyday life does not always work that way. Anastaplo notes that this feature of art helps human beings to understand the nature of things: "Art brings reason to bear in novel ways on concrete situations, making sense (or, at least, seeming to make sense) of what may otherwise appear to be governed by chance" (p. 164). "Chance does not make sense. . . . Chance developments are not truly instructive, morally or otherwise, except to the extent that they may point up the fragility and limitations of human life" (pp. 142–43).

But should not our awareness of "the fragility and limitations of human life" draw attention to the inadequacy of Greek rationalism? If the universe is contingent, then the unassisted human mind cannot fully make sense of it. The ancient Greek conception of nature assumes that the cosmos is a self-contained order that is rationally comprehensible on its own terms. But this gives us no way to rationally account for irregularities—the accidental events and the uniqueness of everything that exists.

Saint Augustine saw this as the critical defect in pagan rationalism, which could be repaired only by appeal to the Biblical revelation. The contingency of nature indicates the dependence of nature on the supernatural Creator. Since nature cannot be made intelligible as a self-contained whole, we can make sense of it only by transcending it through faith. We must believe in order to understand. (I have worked through this Augustinian reasoning in *Political Questions: Political Philosophy from Plato to Rawls*, chapter 3, sections 1–3.)

What does Anastaplo think about such matters? He concedes that ultimately all knowledge may depend upon a kind of "faith" in certain "impressions and premises," but he apparently considers this consistent with Socratic philosophy (p. 484). And although he sees religion as important for certain purposes, he tends to link it to poetry. "Those whom the ancient Israelites called 'prophets,' the equally ancient Greeks called 'poets'" (p. 11). "A useful way of talking about nature once was to talk about the divine" (p. 416; see also p. 68).

But is it correct to say that the Biblical presentation of the "divine" is simply a "poetic" way of speaking about "nature"? Or does this overlook the uniqueness of *Biblical* religion in affirming that all has been created "out of nothing"? Should not Biblical "creationism" be understood as a fundamental alternative to Socratic "naturalism"? With respect to this issue, I suppose that I am inclined to the position taken by Leo Strauss and Harry Jaffa, a position that Anastaplo implicitly challenges (see pp. 268–71).

But at this point surely some readers would want to object that neither Biblical religion nor Socratic philosophy gives us a proper understanding of nature, for have not both been superseded by modern natural science? Anastaplo insists, however, that modern science actually obscures our view of nature as it truly is (pp. 296, 415–16). Yet at the same time, he certainly recognizes—as did

Strauss—“that modern science has kept alive a tradition of inquiry, a respect for reason and for the truth” (p. 253). It is prudent, I think, to stress—contrary to popular assumptions—the ways in which modern science supports the premodern understanding of nature.

Most of Anastaplo’s criticisms of science are directed against mathematical physics (pp. 252–53, 268, 296, 339–41, 415–16; but cf. *The Constitutionalist*, pp. 806–8). And yet I am reminded of an observation by Werner Heisenberg, in commenting on scientific theories of the behavior of elementary particles: “I think that on this point modern physics has definitely decided for Plato. For the smallest units of matter are in fact not physical objects in the ordinary sense of the word; they are forms, structures or—in Plato’s sense—Ideas, which can be unambiguously spoken of only in the language of mathematics” (*Across the Frontiers*, p. 116). Does this show that some thoughtful physicists *are* searching for what Anastaplo calls the “ultron” (pp. 252–53)?

But perhaps modern biology gives us an even clearer view of nature (in the old-fashioned sense of that word). In fact, Anastaplo suggests that the most evident manifestations of nature are biological: birth and death, the growth of plants and animals to maturity, sexuality, family life, and the ranking of animals according to their cognitive capacities (pp. 8, 20–25, 67, 84, 91, 96–98, 112, 122, 127–29, 156, 175, 178, 204, 221, 267, 305, 320, 357–63, 446, 483–85). Anastaplo may be right about the tendency of modern scientists to ignore the presuppositions of their work, presuppositions that are grounded in our prescientific, commonsense experience of the nature of things. But is not this more likely to be true for the physical sciences than for the biological sciences? Is not the biologist forced to confront the natural purposefulness of things (see p. 484)?

I do not presume to know enough about modern biology to offer authoritative assessments. Yet I have the impression that Darwinian biology can reasonably be interpreted as supporting an Aristotelian conception of nature. Indeed, some prominent biologists have made such a claim. In particular, there is evidence that Darwinian biology could sustain the fundamental assumption of Anastaplo’s argument—the supremacy of reason as the distinctive feature of human nature. (I have explored these ideas in *Political Questions*, chapter 2, sections 2–3; and chapter 8, section 1.)

Evolutionary biology might even confirm, in some manner, Anastaplo’s view of art as a way of thinking about nature. As far as we know, from studies of the prehistoric cave paintings in France and Spain, art appeared first about 30,000 years ago. And one plausible inference from the evidence is that this Stone Age art served the evolutionary adaptation of human beings by helping them to express and preserve their accumulated knowledge of their world. Art symbolized and dramatized the practical knowledge necessary for life in human communities. (John Pfeiffer has argued for this conclusion in *The Creative Explosion*.)

We could think about the history of art—from the Stone Age to the Space Age—as reflecting the changing forms of human knowledge. Pagan religion,

Socratic philosophy, and the Biblical tradition have all found poetic expression. Do we now need a new kind of poetry—perhaps Shakespearean science fiction?

I have commented on only a few of the issues brought to mind by Anastaplo's book. This is a book that one cannot read seriously without pondering important questions concerning human nature and the nature of the universe, which is what a good book should do.